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Exploring the use of Qualitative Social Psychology in

Political Science: Discursive Themes of an 18-24

Cohort shaping their Propensity to Vote

Thesis submitted by Mark Cole

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for the degree of (Ph.D.) Doctor of Philosophy in

Political Science

The Open University

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# Abstract

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This thesis explores the use of qualitative social psychology in political science. The reason for conducting the research was the realisation that research within political science was dominated by quantitative realist methodologies and that existing qualitative research methods were ill-equipped to accommodate a linguistic interpretation of events. This thesis does not necessarily aim to supplant existing methodologies rather it asks how qualitative social psychology could compliment and facilitate existing methodological approaches.

Qualitative social psychology is increasingly underpinned by social constructionism (Willig, 2001); that meaning is based on perspectives and that through their use of language individuals constantly make and remake the social (Burr, 2003; 2015). This methodology is relativistic. It suggests that meaning is specific and relative to social, cultural and historical moments (Parker, 1998) and draws on interpretivism suggesting that unlike in the hard sciences truth and evidence of social issues such as poverty is dependent on the interpretation by people (Schwandt, 2003). The thesis will use a constructionist thematised method to exemplify this approach. This method shares common ground with a range of methods used in qualitative social psychology that builds on initial thematised coding and consequently may lead to a broader understanding of the possibilities of using this approach in political science.

To explore the possibilities of using qualitative psychology the thesis considered changes in attitudes to voting of the 18-24 cohort in the UK. The turnout of this cohort at general elections has declined since the 1992 general election and this has been problematic to



explain using existing political science methodologies. A group of forty participants that might have typically taken part in a study investigating this topic were recruited. These were group interviewed and their talk was transcribed and then analysed to identify discursive codes and themes.

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# **Chapter One**

## **Introduction**

### **1.1 - The Aims of this Thesis**

This thesis explores the use of qualitative social psychology, specifically those elements of the field which highlight the importance of language and social constructionism, in political science. It explores the opportunities that using this approach could bring to the field. This is achieved by applying this approach to consider an existing salient question, namely the change in attitudes to voting and turnout of the 18-24 cohort in UK general elections from 1997 to 2010. It compares the existing explanations of this question and the methodologies these explanations have used with the results achieved using qualitative social psychology. In so doing, it suggests what the use of qualitative social psychology could bring to the study of propensity to vote and other similar topics within political science and highlights and explores problems associated with the use of the methodology in political science.

Using qualitative psychology within political science presents a number of issues and opportunities. These principally derive from different epistemological premises.

Qualitative social psychology is heavily influenced by social constructionism. This suggests that meaning is occasioned: socially, historically and culturally constructed. In contrast, political science is broadly dependent on an empiricist, realist and essentialist notion: that there is a single reality that can be experienced (Smith, 1998). A consequence of this is that matters of quality in qualitative social psychology are often founded on ideas such as reflectivity whilst political science usually draws on ideas from the hard sciences. As a



result of this, within this thesis, whilst I will use methods from qualitative social psychology, such as reflectivity, this will be partly focused on the contrast between this and validation methods usually used in political science.

A key point, that needs to be highlighted early in this thesis, is a different conceptualisation of attitudes. Quantitative and realist approaches have tended to consider an attitude as an “object of thought” (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p. 43): relatively fixed and enduring. Within qualitative psychology, attitudes are seen as shaped by the talk or discourse that people use and are consequently socially constructed and occasioned.

There were two main reasons for undertaking this thesis. The first is a broadly defined issue within the study of attitudes to voting, electoral behaviour and political science generally: enquiry in these fields is dominated by, realist and empirically driven, statistical methods, modelling and survey research derived principally from econometrics (Bartels and Brady, 1993; Jackson, 1996; King, 2008) and these methods have known flaws and issues. Survey research for instance tends to systematically over record party identification (Bartle, 1999; 2003; Harrison, 2013).

Having said that, there is a smaller, but important and noteworthy, body of qualitative work in political science adhering to a range of epistemological positions including social constructionism. For instance, Carvalho and Winters (2014) use a social constructionist narrative analysis drawing on the work of Riessman (1993, 2000) to explain why the apparent popularity of Nick Clegg, the liberal democrat leader in the 2010 general election did not translate into electoral success. Winters and Carvalho (2013) used focus groups and participant led coding to analyse the leadership debates of the 2010 election. Therese O’ Toole et al (2003a; 2003b) used focus groups to explore the reasons why

young people participated in politics or abstained and group interviews to explore young people's conception of the political. Henn et al (2002) use a similar method to explore young people's interest in politics.

It has been argued because of the dominance of particular methodological approaches in political science that research methods which are idiosyncratic to this could have a useful contribution to make to the field (Harrison, 2001; 2013). The second reason is far more personal. I have taught young people politics for many years, in Reading, where I live and my wife is also involved in local politics there. I was amazed by the, almost, complete lack of political knowledge of young people entering my classes, particularly in contrast to my own family's engagement with the political arena. I was both fascinated by the academic explanations for this but felt that there was something missing from them and consequently something, possibly, to be gained by considering a new approach.

This introductory chapter performs a number of functions:

- it outlines certain key ideas within the thesis;
- it discusses the research questions;
- it establishes the scope of the thesis; and
- outlines how the remaining chapters of the thesis will contribute to those research questions.

This chapter is divided into six sections. This first section outlines this chapter, giving an overview of qualitative social psychology, defining key terms, discussing the approach of the study, and the consequent research questions that these points leads to. The next section discusses the broad methodological approaches used within political science to investigate issues such as attitudes to voting and considers how social constructionism could potentially inform these methodologies. This thesis does not, necessarily, aim to

supplant existing methodologies, rather it asks how qualitative social psychology could compliment and facilitate existing methodological approaches. The third and fourth section will then describe the substantive topic that this study explores; the change in both the attitudes to voting and turnout by the 18-24 cohort in UK general elections from 1997 and considers why this is an important issue. Attitudes to voting are part of a broader idea: propensity to vote. This can be thought of as a range of demographic characteristics of the individual, which change little in the short term, that makes them more or less likely to vote and a range of psychological characteristics that can be thought of as attitudes towards voting. As a result of the nature of the methodology being considered, qualitative social psychology, this thesis will investigate the latter element of propensity to vote. Having considered the study topic, the fifth section of the chapter will then consider the existing political science explanations of this issue. This will outline the present academic understanding of this field and also inform and act as a starting point for a topic guide for this study's investigation of the problem. The sixth and final section of this chapter will then outline how the remaining chapters in this thesis will contribute to answering the research questions posed.

#### **1.1.1 – Qualitative Social Psychology: Social Constructionism, the Linguistic Turn and Thematized Analysis**

It is important to explain the exact nature of the methodology, qualitative social psychology, used in this thesis. Qualitative social psychology is part of the broad field of social psychology and this thesis attempts to explore the use of a small part of this approach in political science. There are a number of points that I will consider to both situate and describe the methodology. Social psychology is eclectic in nature and uses both qualitative and quantitative methods and considers the world from both a realist

and social constructionist perspective. This thesis explores the use of qualitative social constructionist social psychology. The broad thrust of this methodology has focused on language in use and whilst generally using more complex methods has been, partly, analytically underpinned by thematised methods (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The idea of social constructionism (Burr, 2003; 2015) and the importance of language in modern social sciences is part of what is termed the linguistic turn (Rorty, 1967).

The first point to be defined is what is meant by the term qualitative social psychology. Social psychology is the study of the interaction between individuals and between individuals and society (Sapsford et al, 1998; Tedeschi et al, 1985). The term qualitative can refer to studies where the principal research process is the collection and analysis of non-numeric value-laden data or alternatively in a lesser sense to describe situations where this method of data collection is incorporated into quantitative methods (Willig, 2001). In this thesis, I explore the use of qualitative research, as the principle research tool, but, naturally, this has implications for its use as an addition to other methodological approaches. As hinted at earlier, this is not simply a matter of joining one methodological approach to another as there are numerous epistemological and ontological complications.

A second important point to consider is the methodological stances within qualitative social psychology and the methodological stance of this thesis. There are three important methodological approaches used in qualitative social psychology. Early social psychology, particularly in the middle part of the twentieth century, was dominated by an approach known as positivism which developed, in the latter half of the twentieth century, into a range of approaches that could be referred to as realism or post-positivism. These suggested that there was one reality that could be experienced and that any suggestion

of something underlying this, beyond direct experience, was metaphysical nonsense (Smith, 1998).

A further epistemological stance, known as critical realism, has begun to emerge again in the latter part of the last century. Critical realism is not the subject of this thesis but it is appropriate to mention it, as it is an increasingly important and alternative epistemological stance. Critical realism is a development, principally by Bhaskar, of Marx's approach to science. It suggests that there is an ontological blindness in other methodological approaches. Critical realism suggests that there is a reality that we can know and suggests that the focus of research should be on what underlying realities must be, to allow certain observations of the social world to be made, rather than others (Alveson and Skoldberg, 2010).

A further epistemological framework that is part of the subject of this study, social constructionism, came to the fore in the latter part of the last century. Although there were clear precursors to this idea as early as the enlightenment, the notion of social constructionism was first clearly articulated by Berger and Luckman's work (1967) *The Social Construction of Reality* and later developed by others such as Gergen (2009). The principle premise underlying this idea was that reality could only be understood through the differing perspectives of individuals within society and that reality, or our understanding of it, was consequently both made and remade by the meaning shared between individuals. This occurred principally through talk and consequently social constructionism can be thought of as part of the linguistic turn (Rorty, 1967) in social sciences.

The third point that I consider is the linguistic turn in social sciences. This idea can be traced back to Rorty's (1967) book of the same name. The linguistic turn is an ontological

and epistemological approach that privileges the roles of linguistic structures over socio-political and economic structures and suggests four points. First, that the former constitutes the latter in terms of meaning. Second, that we only understand the latter in terms of the language used in conjunction with them. Third, that the language that people use has a multitude of meanings which are socially dependent; we use different meanings in different social contexts and fourth our language is action orientated; we do things with it. Consequently, the language that we use shapes both our understanding of our socio-political and economic world and our behaviour within it (Rorty, 1967; Wetherell et al 2001).

The beginnings of the broad idea that the linguistic turn represents can be traced back principally to the influences of Wittgenstein's (1921; 1999), Searle's (1969; 1979) and Austin's (1975) linguistic philosophy and the analysis of the structure of language by De Saussure (1983) and Chomsky (1986; 1988). This ontological and epistemological philosophy highlighting the importance of language in explaining the social, political and economic achieved some prominence, partly, because the notion of the primacy of language became an overarching theme in the post-structuralist movement (Derrida, 1978; Foucault, 2002).

The linguistic turn is a feature of a range of methodologies that qualitative social psychology draws upon. It is important in anthropological methodologies (see Gumperz and Levinson, 1996; Harre and Muhlhausler, 1990). It is a key idea in post-Marxist Bakhtinian analysis (see Holquist, 2002; Todorov, 1984). Conversation analysis methodology developed from the Garfinkel's ethnomethodology, which was the study of the naturally occurring methods that people use to construct the social (see Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984). Conversation analysis took part of this and focused on the

naturally occurring talk that individuals use (Ten Have, 2007). Similarly, post-structuralists developed a linguistically focused methodology referred to as Foucauldian analysis (see Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2008; Kendall and Wickham, 2004).).

This eclecticism has led to some tensions within qualitative social psychology. These are primarily due to the conflict between the macro and the micro: the influence of post-structuralism and conversation analysis. This will be discussed further in the next chapter. There are significant benefits to this eclecticism: the principal one being the flexibility to deal with both the micro-social of individual talk and the macro-social of societal wide language structures (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002; Wetherell et al, 2001). The issues are, to an extent, overcome by using a thematic analysis because of the flexibility and simplicity of the method and the claims it makes. This is a consequence of its position as a precursor to more complex analytic processes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis as a method is my final point to consider in this section. When using a thematic analysis there a number of issues to consider. This includes how to select data to analyse from the body of data collected and whether analysis should be top-down or bottom-up. These two ideas are to a degree interrelated and dependent on the type of research being conducted. In this thesis, I decided to use all the data collected initially and to use a bottom-up approach because I wanted to explore the possibilities of using the methodology rather than answering a specific question. A further issue is the kind of analysis required. Themes can be considered as from a realist point of view where the spoken words of the individual are considered to be an accurate reflection of their experience or, as in this thesis, from a social constructionist viewpoint where the researcher interprets what has been said and theorises about the socio-cultural context in which these themes occur. The former process sharing much in common with coding and

analysis in methodologies such as grounded theory and the latter sharing broad similarities to much of what is referred to as discourse analysis, although in both cases not carrying the theoretical strictures of those methodologies.

Within a thematised social constructionist approach, the key analytic concept is the theme. The term theme is often used in an ill-defined way in research. In a thematised social constructionist analysis the term is quite distinctive and related to the analytic process. A theme is a pattern of response within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The initial processes involve familiarisation with the data and finding codes within the data. Coding in thematised analysis can be thought of as simply the process of grouping or categorising texts: developing or sorting a dataset by similarity. One key point of this drawing on social constructionism is that coding is exhaustive: a single piece of text can be coded to multiple codes (Burr, 2003; 2015).

The analysis then moves to finding themes within the data. This is an iterative process starting with initial themes and then consolidating these as the analytic process continues. The aim is to develop a set of themes that reflect the coding and together reflect the meanings in the data set as a whole. This, initially, involves considering how codes link, how formed themes link back to codes and how the codes are defined but can lead to a process of recoding and reconsidering the raw data.

The final process is then to consider and explain, as part of the writing process, how the body of themes produced explain the data set that you started with. This is a further analytic process and, as Braun and Clarke (2006) put it, should go beyond a mere description of the themes and consider the broader, and perhaps, societal implications of themes.



### 1.1.2 - The Study and its Topic

The substantive topic that this thesis will investigate using this methodology is the 18-24-year-old cohort's attitudes towards voting and the consequent effects on turnout. There have been significant falls in the levels of electoral turnout in both first and second order elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980) in a large number of democracies, including the UK, that are concerning both academics and politicians (Blais, 2000; Dalton, 1988; 1996; 2004; Franklin, 1996; Stoker, 2006). This is because, as will be explained later, political theory suggests that turnout should be higher and low turnouts tend to undermine government legitimacy.

The study reported here, was undertaken around and shortly after the 2010 general election. This was, therefore, merely a snapshot of political behaviour used purely to explore the use of a methodological approach. A purposive group of forty participants from the 18- 24 cohort was recruited. Twenty-one of these claimed to be voters and nineteen claimed to be non-voters. The aim was to interview groups of participants who had had just one opportunity to vote in a general election. There were three reasons for using this group. First, from a realist political science perspective, it was hoped that the impact of political socialisation and decisions over whether to vote or not might still be relatively nascent in the participants (Dawson et al, 1977). Second, it was presumed that the results of the study would be relatively reliable because voting attitudes and voter's individual socio-economic circumstances tends to be enduring (Milbraith and Goel, 1977; Miller and Shanks, 1996; Plutzer, 2002; Verba and Nie, 1987) and consequently, participants' attitude to voting was likely to remain unchanged in several subsequent general elections. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, from a qualitative social psychology perspective, it was hoped that this group would use a wide range of talk or

discourses associated with beginning to vote because of the societal pressure put upon them to do so at this point in their lives.

### **1.1.3 - Turnout and the Propensity to Vote**

According to, orthodox, realist, political science, turnout in elections can be considered to be a product of two groups of factors (Blais and St Vincent, 2011). First, there is a range of election characteristics that can affect turnout. This includes:

- the type of electoral system: proportional representation, majoritarian or hybrid forms ( Blais and Carty, 1990; Jackman, 1987; Powell, 1986);
- electoral law: whether voting is legally enforced (Jackman; 1987);
- the salience of an election: whether the election is seen as important (Franklin and Van der Eijk, 2004); and
- the closeness of the contest (ibid).

Second, there are a number of individual psychological attitudes and sociodemographic factors that affect the likelihood that a person will turn out to vote. These include their:

- willingness to take part in unconventional political activities (Norris, 2002; Parry et al, 1992);
- sense of party identification (Clarke et al, 2004);
- perceptions of the cost and benefits of an election (Clarke et al, 2004);
- sense of civic duty (ibid);
- levels of political knowledge and sophistication (Carpini and Keeter, 1997; Popkin and Dimock, 1999);
- levels of political efficacy (Balch, 1974; Clarke and Acock, 1989; Craig and Maggiotto, 1982; Good and Mayer, 1975; Morrell, 2003; Niemi et al, 1991);

- levels of political trust (Dalton, 1996; 1998; 2004; Klingemann, 1999; Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995);
- the processes of political socialisation which they have undergone (Niemi and Hepburn, 1995); and their
- age, class, income, gender, ethnicity and level of education (Clarke et al, 2004; Verba et al 1995).

These characteristics together constitute an individual's propensity to vote. This is important in explaining the decline in electoral turnout in three respects. First, it is apparent that a change in attitudes towards voting rather than a change in the characteristics of elections is the cause of the decline in UK general elections turnout; second that this change in attitudes to voting is, in large part, because of a change in the attitudes to voting of 18-24 cohorts between election cycles (Clarke et al, 2004; 2009; Whiteley, 2012); third, that this attitude to voting is particularly suitable to investigate using an approach such as qualitative social psychology because of its socio-psychological nature. This then suggests that the topic of study is both interesting in itself and that using a different methodological approach might shed new light on it.

#### **1.1.4 – The Sampling of talk**

The participants, in this study, were interviewed in small groups using semi-structured interviewing techniques with prompt questions derived from the existing explanations of the change in 18-24 attitudes to voting. The interviews used a probing and challenging questioning style distinctive to social constructionist approaches (Wetherell and Potter, 1992, p99).

The extent to which semi-structured interviews are the optimum form of data collection within qualitative social psychology is contested (See Potter and Hepburn, 2005 and

Smith et al, 2005 for details). In this study, though, because of the nature of the research topic, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most suitable method (as per Silverman, 2009; Wetherell and Potter, 1992, p99).

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interview transcriptions were then reviewed and coded. The study produced a range of initial codes and consequent themes. These were important in exploring the attitudes towards voting of the participants in the study

### **1.1.5 - The Consequent Research Questions**

The overarching research questions that this thesis will focus on are:

- what is the benefit of using qualitative social psychology within political science?
- Could qualitative social psychology contribute to the existing methodologies within political science?
- What are the benefits associated with using qualitative social psychology?
- How should it be used?
- What pitfalls or problems are associated with its use? And
- are the different epistemological positions reconcilable?

The answers to these questions were explored in the study that was undertaken. As a result of this, the primary research aim was to consider the performance of qualitative social psychology in the study. To consider this question, the codes and themes derived from participant's talk were compared to the existing explanations of the change in 18-24 cohort attitudes to voting from the literature and a subsidiary set of research questions were asked. These were:

- how could the codes and themes used by participants shape their attitudes to voting?
- What are the possible implications of this? And
- how could this enhance our understanding of the change in the attitudes to voting of the 18-24 cohort?

The themes suggested that:

- a feeling that politics lacked relevance to them, a disbelief in sources of information regarding politics and a feeling that the political classes were different shaped people away from voting;
- a deep disengagement with politics made some participants almost incapable of voting; but on the other hand,
- some voters were persuaded to vote, felt that voting was particularly critical and had engaged with politics in a deeper way than might be expected; this was linked to the final idea that
- some participants felt that voting was important for moral reasons.

This was then arguably a productive and fruitful study, which suggests its inherent quality, (Wetherell and Potter, 1987, pp. 169-172) and has resulted in a number of possible new avenues for future research. The study has also possibly suggested a different and unusual ontological and epistemological viewpoint regarding political science research in that it highlights the manner in which the psychological, through talk, can shape political behaviour.

I argue, in the course of this thesis, that the use of qualitative social psychology could be beneficial in that it could enhance the existing methodologies used in political science.

Ergo, the thesis then asked a final set of research questions.

- Why was it that using qualitative social psychology was so beneficial in this study?
- What were the disadvantages and limitations of using qualitative social psychology in this study?
- What are the possibilities of using qualitative social psychology within political science?

## **1.2 - Qualitative Social Psychology and Existing Political Science**

### **Methodologies: Differing Epistemological Positions and their Consequences**

A critical issue in this thesis is to consider how qualitative social psychology could inform existing approaches used in political science. This is problematic because of the different and largely, if not wholly, incommensurate epistemological positions between the range of research approaches used in political science and those used in qualitative social psychology. There are a number of different methodologies used in political science and social sciences generally. These can be thought of as key ideas intertwined with the two broad approaches to research; quantitative research and qualitative research which when used together, by design are referred to as mixed methods. This section, therefore, examines some of the present approaches to research in political science and considers their inherent methodological positions and where there is some possibility of adopting a methodological position more consistent with social constructionism.

Despite the apparent range of methodological approaches used in political science, the broad idea that underpins the majority of the research in political science, irrespective of the system of enquiry within used within individual studies, can be thought of as a realist, empiricist methodology. This is not to say that this is the only approach rather that it is dominant in the field. This realist, empiricist, perspective developed from what is termed as positivism in the last century. The approach contains a number of epistemic

assumptions. These stem and are developed from the positivist approaches that preceded it.

The central idea behind positivism was that there was a single reality out there that individual's experienced and consequently the role of the researcher was to methodically study this. There are a number of assumptions that have developed from this that tends to shape the manner in which research is conducted in social science. Chief amongst these is a tendency to follow the methods of the hard sciences and to treat language as straightforward: a true reflection of the speaker's mind (Smith, 1998).

The epistemological approach in this thesis is social constructionism. Social constructionism is the idea that knowledge is created through social interaction.

Therefore, our understanding of how political parties operate and people choose to vote or not vote is shaped by the interaction between people regarding this; principally how they talk about it. There are a number of consequent features of this approach. It suggests that knowledge:

- is socially occasioned: dependent on the context of the speaker and the listener
- is historically and culturally specific: and
- shapes our behaviour

The consequence of this is that social constructionism questions a number of our taken for granted assumptions about the world and points out that these can be seen from different perspectives (Burr, 2003; 2015).

A further important methodological approach began to emerge in the final part of the last century. Critical realism, whilst not the subject of this thesis, is important to acknowledge. Critical realism, whilst accepting much of the premise of every individual having a different perspective and there being a consequent range of meaning argued for by social

constructionism considers that there is a real ontological world behind this that should be focused on (Alveson and Skoldberg, 2010).

### **1.2.1 - Quantitative Methodology**

Quantitative research is a key approach in the realist post-positivist tradition.

Quantitative research is an important approach in political science because it is arguably, in terms of number of studies, the predominant approach particularly in work which seeks to produce nomothetic generalised responses to research questions (McNabb, 2010). Quantitative research can be thought of as a group of methods in which the principal underlying rationale is that using a sufficiently large representative sample of cases from a population increases the validity and credibility of the research. Broadly speaking quantitative research is based on deduction. This is the logical inference of a hypothesis from theory. Quantitative research is then designed to test and develop derived hypotheses (Babbie, 2012; Bryman, 2015). There are a number of approaches within the broad brush framework of quantitative research that are important in political science. These include methodologies such as formal modelling, survey research and experimentation.

### **1.2.2 - Formal modelling**

Formal modelling focuses the model builder on the key presumptions and factors regarding the object of study and removes the detail and minutia which obscure these key issues (Fiorina, 1975; Johnson, 2008). Downs (1957), for instance, wanted to consider the economics behind political participation and focused solely on the cost and benefits of taking part in political activities. This is not to say that Downs was unaware of other factors, it is simply that other ideas, such as party identification, were not the object of study.



The modeller builds their model using sets of 'primitives' or undefined terms, defined terms and assumptions related to them. Modellers pay significant attention to the clarity of definitions and arguments within the models and use logical deduction or mathematics to come to conclusions. Conclusions that are counter intuitive are particularly valued in this form of research (Fiorina, 1975; Johnson et al, 2008).

### **1.2.3 - Survey Research**

The survey is an important quantitative method of data collection within political science and particularly within the study of propensity to vote. The reason for survey research having such importance is that, with certain caveats, survey researchers have the opportunity to produce findings that are universally applicable within a certain margin of error. Survey research is the tool most often associated with opinion polls and attitude research (Fowler, 2002; Johnston, 2008). The process of survey research often starts with considering what overarching questions the survey needs to answer and the consequent approach to questions. This is essentially an epistemological question that considers the interaction between the participants and the survey tool. A survey may wish to find out why people vote for a political party. The researcher, because of their prior experience, does not ask individuals questions directly. Instead, the researcher asks the participants to rank a list of current issues according to their importance as they have already mapped issue salience to electoral choice and they know that individuals are often unaware of their motivations. Even this approach does not necessarily lead to responses that relate to an underlying reality. Surveys are not necessarily a good research instrument for some questions. Various occurrences may lead to error. Respondents may simply recall their latest stance on an issue (Krosnick, 1999; Zaller and Feldman, 1992; Zaller, 1992), or try to determine what the survey administrator would like as a response (Harrison, 2001; 2013).

#### **1.2.4 - Experimental Methods**

Experimental methods have been growing in use and importance in social sciences since the 1970s (Morton and Williams, 2008). Experimentation is a methodology in its own right as it has a distinct epistemological approach. In the classical experimental approach, a researcher will recruit a group of participants who will then be formed, randomly and without the knowledge of the researcher or the participants, into two groups. This is a process referred to as random allocation. One group will be subject to experimentation and the other will not but will act as a control group. Then a variable will be adjusted for the experimental group but not the control group, again without the knowledge of the participants or researcher. This is known as a double-blind process. There is an attempt, within the experiment, to control for all other variables. The researcher will then look for changes or outcomes across all the participants and only after measuring changes or outcomes will the researcher be made aware of which participants are part of the control group and which are part of the experiment group. As a result, the researcher should be able to discern any changes in outcome solely because of the adjusted variable rather than by a chance or placebo effect (Bloom, 2006; Morton and Williams, 2008; Kirk 2012). This type of classical experiment is often of benefit in political science in such activities as determining the veracity of game theory or rational choice theories where the ability or at least the attempt to control variables can be critical. There is also significant usage in areas where causality is a key research aim.

Sometimes, though, there are situations where abstracting the situation from the social context can either be impossible or undesirable in which case researchers may choose to use pseudo or quasi-experiments. In a quasi-experiment, a researcher adopts a real situation where variables are usually outside of their control. The researcher is also not

able to assign participants to particular groups but rather uses individuals in preformed groups. For instance, if a researcher were to investigate the effect of a change in government policy on voting they would try and determine a group of participants affected by the change and a group unaffected by the change. The researcher would then try to control for other variables by careful selection of group members or other means. They might try for instance to ensure that the two groups were very similar socio-demographically (Gerber and Green; 2008; Kirk, 2012; Cook and Wong, 2008). The pseudo-experiment has some but not all of the advantages and disadvantages of an experiment.

The most important advantage of experiments is that they logically have a very high degree of internal validity and that they can demonstrate causality. If an experiment can show that changing variable A by X results in a change of Y in variable Z then, if all other variables are controlled for, there is a presumption that A causes Z within the confines of the experiment (Bloom, 2006; Kirk 2012). This presumption is clearly more difficult in a quasi-experiment but it is still the rationale for conducting this type of research.

### **1.2.5 - Social Constructionist Quantitative Research**

Quantitative methods are designed to determine a universally applicable result to a study. A methodology, such as qualitative social psychology, is not attempting to meet that aim. The majority of quantitative studies, in the design or interpretation of findings, use elements of qualitative methodology to further the research. One, for instance, might use focus groups to help test or arrive at survey questions or issues to be researched by experiment. Alternatively, quantitative researchers test or develop the work of other quantitative researchers but, perhaps, use questions or ideas from the original study determined by qualitative methods. This arguably often occurs in some realist studies

unconsciously or without deep consideration of the epistemological issues (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Nevertheless, there are quantitative approaches with qualitative elements, such as Q methodology, where the epistemic issues are often considered and consistency with social constructionism is possible. In Q methodology participants are encouraged to choose and order a matrix of statements about an issue. The researcher then studies the clusters of opinions statements that the participant group has collectively sorted through this process. This approach values the subjective opinion of the participants rather than compelling them to adopt a predetermined answer developed by the researcher (Brown, 1997; 2004). Various pieces of research within political science have been conducted using Q methodology considering such issues as:

- political cartoons (Kinsey and Taylor, 1982; Root, 1995; Trahair, 2003);
- political images (Bass, 1997);
- subjectivity in politics; and (Brown, 1980; Felkins and Goldman, 1993); and
- the manner in which political events have been interpreted (Brown and Unga, 1980; Thomas et al, 1993).

This suggests that using a social constructionist approach within quantitative political science is not only possible but could be beneficial.

### **1.2.6 - Qualitative Methodology**

A second broad approach attempts to consider a small number of in-depth cases. This is qualitative research. This approach has a more eclectic epistemological and ontological basis adopting realist, critical realist and social constructionist methodologies. A proportion of qualitative work uses simple inductive methodology and data collection

techniques such as focus groups and interviews (Babbie2012; Bryman, 2015). This is often the approach used when quantitative researchers use qualitative techniques to supplement their central research methodology and is characteristically realist in its perspective. It is important to note that a number of approaches to qualitative research which are similarly realist or critically realist use complex and sophisticated approaches to attempt to determine an underlying reality.

Social constructionist based qualitative research has some important differences with realist qualitative research. Social constructionist qualitative research:

- presumes that the social is constructed from the interaction between individual people rather than simply being out there;
- presumes we can only understand the social by understanding how individuals view the social (Bryman, 2015); and
- suggests that explanations for the social are culturally and historically situated and as a consequence of this research findings cannot lead to generally applicable laws (Wetherell and Potter, 1987).

There are some criticisms of social constructionist qualitative research from realist and critical realist perspectives that are derived from these differences. These are that:

- the findings of many qualitative research pieces are arguably partly constituted by the subjective interpretation of the researcher rather than an objective reality; and
- qualitative work finds making broad generalisations past specific cases problematic (Harrison, 2001; 2013).

This critique though usually fails to acknowledge two important social constructionist ideas. First, that our understanding of reality is built from a variety of perspectives and

understanding the process by which these perspectives are understood; the notion of intersubjectivity is important in establishing the nature of the claims that research can make. Second, that research findings as with any type of human understanding are limited by the social, historical and cultural context in which they are situated (Burr, 2003; 2015).

### **1.2.7 - Case Studies**

A key difference between the qualitative and quantitative approach is the size of the sample or the number of participants that take part. There are a number of different qualitative approaches that are important within political science but three that emphasise this difference are the case study and the associated ideas of the longitudinal case study and of comparing case studies. (Gomm et al, 2000; Levy, 2008)

The term case study refers to the investigation of a single unit of study. The case might be a single individual or a group of people: the idea of the case is that it represents a bounded system (Stake, 1995; 2001). The unit of study needs to be chosen with care: they are chosen because they are very typical or because they unusually break some near universally accepted tenet of theory.

The point of case study research is to provide an in-depth view of that single case usually over a period of time. This can then be used to either refute an existing accepted viewpoint or as a preliminary investigation into further research using other methods (Levy, 2008).

An important use of the case study is where two or more case studies are used to provide an in-depth comparison between cases. This comparative work can focus on a particular aspect of the cases in question or be related to specific research questions. It can also be

used to produce some wider generalisations regarding the research findings (Silvermann, 2005; 2009).

A consequence of this focus in the case study, of concentrating on a single case, is that broader methodological questions are set aside. Case studies can use realist, critical realist or social constructionist methodological perspectives. The question of which methodological perspective to use is broadly determined by the views of the researcher. This would then determine how the data in the case would be used and understood.

### **1.2.8 - Ethnography**

A further key qualitative approach used in a variety of social sciences including political science is ethnography. Within political research, ethnography has been used to investigate areas such as political violence and transitions to democracy in different parts of the world (see Ashforth, 2005; Weinstein, 2007; Wood, 2000).

The ethnographic method has its roots in anthropology. It is a term that suggests the study of a people. Ethnography contains the implicit idea that the researcher is observing whatever human situation the object of study is, from the point of view both of an insider and an outsider: an ethnographer becomes immersed in a socio-political setting to gain deeper understanding but writes from the perspective of the research scientist looking in. Ethnography could be regarded as considering the strangeness of everyday behaviours in different social settings (Gobo, 2011; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007)

Within the umbrella methodological term ethnography, a number of research practices and data collection methods can be used. This includes observation and interviewing but the archetypal ethnographic method is participant observation: where the researcher immerses themselves within the culture or situation being researched (ibid).

This highlights one of the main presumptions of this research tradition. Ethnographers often suggest that, it is impossible to research objectively and regard the researcher and participants as culturally intertwined. This becomes an aim and a benefit of the research because through this intertwining the researcher is able to truly understand the research situation. One of the issues that arises is an awareness of the power of the researcher in the research situation and a consequent commitment to ensuring that the participants are heard, through reporting the results of the research in an etic manner: in the voice of the participant (Harre, 1980).

A consequence of this is that there is a methodological contradiction within ethnography. The usual central tenet of ethnographic approaches is that by immersing oneself in a cultural setting, the researcher can observe an underlying truth or reality. In contrast, a particular idea within ethnography drawing on the work of Bruner focuses on the need for the different voices of participants to be heard suggesting a social constructionist perspective. For Hammersley (1992) the answer to this is to adopt a critical realist approach but he notes the different views and possibilities in this matter.

### **1.2.9 - Grounded Theory**

Another important qualitative approach is grounded theory. Grounded theory was proposed in 1967 by Glaser and Strauss in an effort to develop a more systematic method of qualitative research that would lead to the production of substantive but localised theory. This was in response to the dominance of and prevalence of the use of 'grand theories': often the outcome of deductively based quantitative research or normative theorising (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Grounded theory starts with a process of data collection. This tends to be in the form of field notes rather than transcriptions. The field notes are then coded. As theory or



explanations for the body of coding begin to emerge further coding is progressively selective and used either to refute or confirm the emergent theory. The validity of the theory is judged on the fit of the data to coding and how well emergent theory accommodates further coded data (Glaser, 1998).

Grounded theory has proved to be an area of methodological tension and dispute in the recent decades between those advocating a social constructionist pathway and those holding to a more traditional grounded theory realist perspective. Grounded theory's original stance and purpose focused on finding explanations for localised research problems that could be seen to be more universally applicable. It focused on a prescriptive approach to the application of coding to avoid issues such as researcher bias (Glaser, 2002). In contrast, to this other researchers using grounded theory have noted the value of using a social constructionist approach (See Charmaz, 2000; 2006; 2008 in particular) This involves adopting a significantly more reflective approach to the grounded theory process and considering that there are multiple perspectives in the data. It is apparent that social constructionism can be usefully applied to grounded theory approaches.

It is apparent then from the illustrations and examples given that using a social constructionist methodology, whilst unusual in political science, has been shown to offer benefits within a range of methods that are already are being used in political science. There is then the question of whether its use could be furthered and what benefit could there be from doing so.

### **1.3 - The Importance of Electoral Turnout by the 18-24 cohort**

The topic that this exploration of the use of qualitative social constructionist social psychology will address is the change in attitudes to voting and turnout in UK general

elections by the 18-24 cohort. This is an important question at present and there are a number of reasons for this.

The starting point for explaining this concern is that turnout behaviour tends to be enduring. A body of work suggests that once an individual becomes a voter or non-voter this behaviour becomes relatively habitual (Milbraith and Goel, 1977; Miller and Shanks, 1996; Plutzer, 2002; Verba, 1987).

An important caveat to this idea is that propensity to vote has always been subject to the impact of an individual's lifecycle; that an individual tends to be more likely to become a voter as they progress through life (See for instance Blais et al, 2004; Clarke et al, 2004; Miller and Shanks, 1996; Lyons and Alexander, 2000). Life cycle theories are based on two ideas: first, they suggest that the hiatus related to transitions in life depress levels of electoral participation. So, when an individual gets married or when they have recently have had children they are less likely to vote whatever their levels of electoral participation beforehand. Second, and perhaps more importantly, changes in life such as marriage and parenthood are likely to bring about changes in both the personal situation of the individual and the social context in which they make decisions and as a result individuals gain a greater stake in society (Goerres, 2006; Jennings, 1979; Stoker and Jennings 1995). This then tends to improve their attitude to voting.

The key concern with the present decline in 18-24 cohort's voting is whether it is a lifecycle, period or generational effect? Whether it is something that is transient or symptomatic of a deeper change within political society? If there was evidence to show that the present decline was simply because young people were beginning to vote later this would amount to a lifecycle effect. If on the other hand the decline was caused by current events such as increased unemployment this would be a period effect. If though

the decline was caused by new generations of citizens behaving differently from their forebears this would be a generational effect. Generational effects are regarded as being much more serious than period or lifecycle effects. The latter can be regarded as temporary discontinuities in the course of electoral turnout; however the former can be a much more long term if not a permanent problem.

It is difficult to distinguish between period, lifecycle and generational effects and early analyses of this issue suggested that although a generational effect could be a possibility it could not be confirmed (Clarke et al, 2004; Franklin and Van der Eijk, 2004; Phelps, 2005). Later analysis suggests that the decline is such that a proportion of it must be because of generational effects (Clarke, 2009). This then suggests a more serious long-term decline in electoral turnout.

### **1.3.1 - Government Legitimacy**

One reason for concerns about low turnout stems from the idea of political legitimacy. There is a complex connection between turnout and the idea of political legitimacy: that the system of government, its institutions and agents are accepted (Easton, 1975; 1979; Lipset, 1959); that through voting the citizen is, to an extent, agreeing to be governed (Hume, 1987; Plamentaz' 1968).

There are two reasons for this connection. First, it has been argued that turnout levels can affect elections outcomes because changes in turnout may affect one party more than another (Pattie and Johnston, 2001; Russell, 2002; Curtice, 2010). Consequently, low levels of turnout tend to undermine legitimacy (Pattie and Johnston, 2001; Scully et al; 2004).

A second more important reason derives from the work of Easton (1975; 1979). Easton thought of political life as a system. Individuals feed demands and needs into the system and the political system gives outputs back to the people. The extent to which this system functions well in the view of the populace leads to their level of political support for the government and its consequent legitimacy. Support for the government came in two forms. Diffuse support is a reservoir of positive feelings towards a government that builds up and endures over a period of time whilst specific support is based on feelings towards incumbent political actors and their policies.

There is a major body of work drawing on Easton's (1975; 1979) writing that focuses on the connections between electoral turnout and political support. This suggests that political support and a belief in electoral fairness is correlated with electoral turnout (Ginsberg, 1982 Ginsberg and Weisberg, 1978; Miller and Listhaug, 1990; 1999). This body of work suggests that voters, perhaps, no longer believe in the fairness of the electoral system nor the system of government and that this could be the underlying cause of declining turnout.

### **1.3.2 - Republican and Liberal Approaches to Turnout**

A second reason for concern with the decline in turnout lies in the great traditions of politics and their approach to this subject. There are perhaps two main, broad brush, approaches to electoral turnout in the literature and both suggest that turnout should be higher than it has been from the 1997 general election onwards.

The first approach might be regarded as the republican or participatory democratic approach. This suggests that electoral and political participation is good for both society and the citizens. This is because through taking part in elections and politics, citizens are better informed and their views become known and considered by others. Consequently,

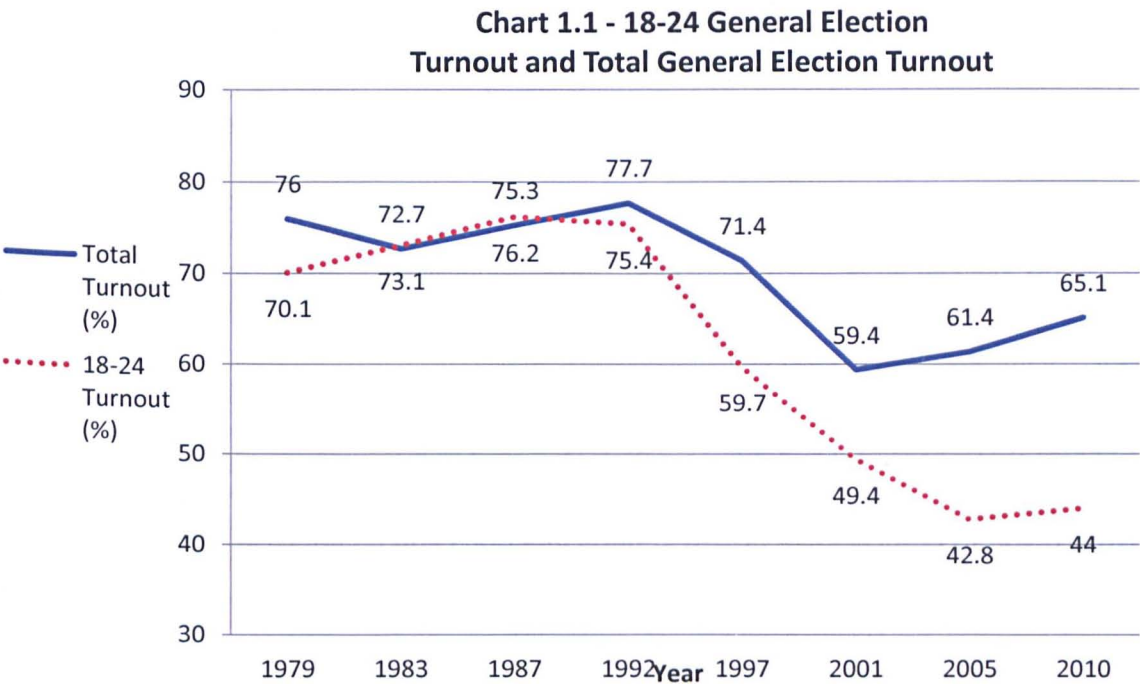
the quality of the public debate is enhanced (Barber, 2001; Cohen, 1997; Holden, 1974; 1988; 1993; MacPherson, 1977; Pettit, 1999; Skinner, 1998).

A second approach might be regarded as the Liberal or minimalist democratic approach. This suggests that individuals have a right not to be involved with politics. They can choose to be apathetic towards politics. There is a caveat to this, though. In this approach, individuals become involved in politics because they are interested in it or because they feel their interests are threatened in their own private sphere: they feel that their interests are being damaged because of events in the public political sphere. In this case, they vote out of protest to protect these interests. This is essentially saying that usually apathetic individuals vote when they are unhappy or dissatisfied with government. Consequently, and in contrast to the previous section, the present low levels of political support should be increasing turnout (Berlin et al, 2002; Hinchman and Hinchman, 1994; Jones, 1954; Schumpeter, 1987). The present decline in turnout should, therefore, cause us to question our understanding of these political traditions.

#### **1.4 - General Election Turnout by the 18-24 Cohort after 1997**

To understand these concerns, it is important to understand what has happened to general election turnout in the UK in the last few decades. The chart 1.1 overleaf shows the levels of turnout for the 18 -24 cohort and the corresponding levels of total turnout in UK general elections from 1979 to 2010. Until 1997 turnout by the 18-24 cohort was consistent with overall turnout in UK general elections. The figures for both 18-24 turnout and the turnout of the rest of the population were between 70% and 80%. From 1997, something different happens. In 1997, there was a significant drop in turnout by the 18-24 cohort by 15.7 % to 59.7%. In subsequent general elections, this trend continued with levels of turnout by this cohort in the last two general elections being 42.8% and 44%

respectively. These figures might be even be understating the case because they represent the proportion of registered



Source: Sanders et al, 2005; Ipsos Mori, 2010

voters that cast their vote. Recent research has shown that a proportion of the potential voting population but particularly those under 24 may not be registered to vote, the electoral register in 2011 being incomplete for 45% of 18-24 yr. olds (Electoral Commission, 2011). Non-completion means that the local authorities request to confirm eligible voters details has not been returned. This does not necessarily mean that voters are not registered in other locations, however, this figure has grown significantly in recent years. This decline in turnout by the 18-24 cohort was principally a consequence of their age. Analysis of electoral data showed that a voter’s age was the main factor in determining whether an individual was likely to vote or not in UK general elections (Clarke et al 2004; 2009; Franklin, 2004; Whiteley, 2012). The only other factor of any significance was ethnicity with non-white voters slightly more likely to abstain than their white counterparts (Sanders et al, 2005).

The most obvious consequence of the change in the attitudes to voting of the 18 -24 cohort was a decline in the overall general election turnout. There were two elements to this. First, the decline in overall turnout was partly caused by the decline in 18-24 turnout. Second, a further phenomenon was that not only were the 18-24 cohort from 1997 onwards less likely to vote, they also appeared less likely to vote as they aged and consequently lower turnouts appeared to be advancing into later age cohorts in subsequent general elections (Clarke et al, 2004; 2009; Phelps, 2004; 2005; Whiteley 2012).

This is demonstrable in table 1.1 below. This shows abstention as a percentage of registered voters in successive British general elections and it can, to an extent, can be read diagonally

**Table 1.1 – Abstention by Registered Voters in British General Elections, 1970-2010 (%)**

Year/Age	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
1970	28	24	18	15	15	11	13
1974F	21	14	12	9	8	10	15
1974O	27	19	13	10	11	11	10
1979	27	18	15	9	8	9	16
1983	26	23	13	11	11	16	16
1987	23	15	14	8	10	10	10
1992	24	13	12	8	13	10	13
1997	38	32	22	15	11	11	16
2001	46	44	33	21	21	14	14
2005	55	48	29	24	16		13
2010	56	45	34	40	27		24

(Sanders et al 2005), although this methodological approach is contested (Denver et al, 2012). The table shows the majority of the 18-24 cohort from the 1992 general election would have moved into the 25-34 cohort by the subsequent general election. It is apparent that the 18-24 cohort that first voted in 1979 had a reasonably high percentage of abstention that decreased as the cohort aged. Compare this with later cohorts such as those from 1997, 2001 and 2005, not only are more of those individuals abstaining but they are still abstaining in large numbers into later life.

#### **1.4- The Research Context**

The study was undertaken in Reading and its surrounding constituencies. Some of these constituencies have a complex history. Reading East and West were formed from the prior Reading North and South constituencies after the 1979 general election and the present Bracknell constituency was created in 1979 principally from the Berkshire east constituency which was itself created prior to the 1983 general election. A number of the constituencies have also been subject to minor boundary changes in the last few decades. As a result of this, considering historical local turnout trends is not wholly reliable.

As the two tables 1.2 and 1.3 overleaf show, the two constituencies where the majority of the participants were resident, Reading East and West, and the mixed rural and urban constituency of Bracknell have a quite similar turnout to that of the UK as a whole. The decline in turnout here has mirrored that in the rest of the UK. This is in contrast to Slough, the other principally urban constituency where participants were resident. Here the recent decline in turnout has been much greater than in the national picture. A further contrast can be seen with the relatively rural and prosperous constituencies of



Henley, Wokingham, Maidenhead and Newbury which have all tended to have higher turnout than the national average.

**Table 1.2 - UK Turnout and Participants' Constituencies**

Constituency\Year	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010
UK turnout	76.00	72.70	75.30	77.70	71.40	59.40	61.40	65.10
Reading West	(North)75.87	72.45	72.24	77.99	70.06	59.10	61.10	65.90
Reading East	(South) 76.48	70.32	73.26	75.02	70.15	58.40	60.10	66.71
Wokingham	78.22	76.00	75.87	82.42	75.03	64.10	68.40	71.38
Bracknell	No Seat	73.35	73.84	81.42	74.52	60.70	63.40	67.81
Henley	77.52	72.94	74.95	79.84	77.60	64.30	67.80	73.19
Newbury	79.32	75.22	77.99	82.76	76.27	67.30	72.60	74.03
Slough	74.92	71.47	75.90	78.25	67.27	53.40	52.20	61.62
Maidenhead	75.43	70.32	75.37	81.68	75.61	62.03	73.30	73.75

Source: Morgan, 2001; Mellows- Facer, 2006; Rhodes et al, 2011

**Table 1.3 – Participant’s Constituencies and Deviance from Average Turnout**

Constituency\Year	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010
Reading West	-0.13	-0.25	-3.06	0.29	-1.34	0.02	-0.30	0.80
Reading East	0.48	-2.38	-2.04	-2.68	-1.25	-0.60	-1.28	1.61
Wokingham	2.22	3.30	0.57	4.72	3.63	5.04	6.99	6.28
Bracknell		0.65	-1.46	3.72	3.12	1.64	2.00	2.71
Henley	1.52	0.24	-0.35	2.14	6.20	5.23	6.45	8.09
Newbury	3.32	2.52	2.69	5.06	4.87	8.27	11.18	8.93
Slough	-1.08	-1.23	0.60	0.55	-4.13	-5.62	-9.18	-3.48
Maidenhead	-0.57	-2.38	0.07	3.98	4.21	2.99	11.88	8.65

Source: (ibid)

There are several important factors that could explain these local turnout trends. Labour voters tend to have a weaker propensity to vote than Conservative or Liberal Democrat voters (Whiteley et al, 2001) and the marginality of particular electoral constituencies can also increase turnout (Denver and Hands, 1974). The constituencies where participants were resident, the political party holding that seat and the majority in the two general elections in which the participants in this study first voted are shown in table 1.4 below. Reading West was the only seat to change hands, in the 2010 general election, and Reading East was the only constituency that could otherwise be considered marginal. A marginal constituency has been defined as one where a swing of less than 5% would oust the incumbent (Lanoue and Bowler, 1992) or simply where the constituency has a small majority (Denver and Hands, 1974; 1993; Johnston and Pattie, 1991). In the constituencies where the study took place

**Table 1.4 - Constituencies, Parties and Marginality**

Constituency\Year	2005			2010		
	Party	MP	Majority	Party	MP	Majority
Reading West	Lab	Martin Salter	4,682	Con	Alok Sharma	6,004
Reading East	Con	Rob Wilson	475	Con	Rob Wilson	7,605
Wokingham	Con	John Redwood	7,240	Con	John Redwood	13,492
Bracknell	Con	Andrew Mackay	12,036	Con	Phillip Lee	15,704
Henley	Con	John Howell	12,793	Con	John Howell	16,588
Newbury	Con	Richard Benyon	3,460	Con	Richard Benyon	12,248
Slough	Lab	Fiona Mactaggart	7,851	Lab	Fiona Mactaggart	5,523
Maidenhead	Con	Theresa May	6,231	Con	Theresa May	16,769

Source: Cracknell et al, 2011; Mellows- Facer, 2006.

more rural Conservative held seats have maintained turn out better than Labour held seats, but this is likely to be a socio-demographic effect (See Verba et al 1995) reflecting class and wealth differences between rural and urban areas.

## **1.5 – Existing Explanations of Changing Attitudes to voting in the 18-24**

### **Cohort**

There are a number of existing explanations of this change in the attitudes to voting by the 18-24 cohort. These are important for a variety of reasons:

- they describe the field in which this study was undertaken;
- they indicate the present state of the art in this field
- they suggest sources of discourse or talk that may be already present in society; consequently,
- they can later be used to develop a topic guide in the form of a series of questions to be used in the data collection phase of this study. As a result of this, the codes and themes identified in this study are provoked by societal talk associated with these theories.

Orthodox approaches to attitudes to voting suggest that the wealthier, the higher your socioeconomic status, the better educated, the more informed and the older you are the more likely you are to vote (See Verba et al 1995).

There has also been a range of populist responses to the decline based on notions such as political apathy or alienation (Kimberlee, 2002; Henn et al 2002; 2005). Political apathy defined as a disinterest in politics and political alienation defined as a discontent with the political system (Crewe et al, 1977). These populist responses have been repeatedly

criticised by the academic community because of evidence of a significant interest in politics in young people (See Kimberlee, 2002; Henn et al 2002; 2005).

Attitudes to voting at elections can also be affected by short-term factors such as:

- the closeness of the election (Matsusaka, 1993);
- the increasing or decreasing marginality of particular seats (Denver and Hands, 1974);
- the extent to which a particular election can be regarded as important or salient (Franklin and Van der Eijk, 2004); and
- the extent to which the political parties manifestos can be seen as different from each other (Matsusaka, 1995).

The change in the attitude to voting by the 18-24 year-old cohort after 1992 is difficult to explain using these approaches principally because of the precipitousness of this decline over the timescale concerned (Whiteley, 2012). Although they may still shape and feature in the talk in the participants. Consequently, several further explanations of this change have been proposed. These follow in order of increasing importance to this thesis.

### **1.5.1 - A Turn to Non-Electoral Politics**

The first explanation for the change in the attitudes to voting of the 18-24 cohort is the idea that there has been a turn to non-electoral politics. This is built on four distinct ideas. The first notion is that young people in the present generation have a distinctive post-materialist or post-modern value system that has gone beyond an older materialist system of values based on class and wealth. Young people are, consequently, moving towards a value system based on self-expression and community (Giddens, 1990; 1991; Inglehart, 1997; 2015).

A second element is the suggestion that in a post-modern world government is preoccupied with global issues such as terrorism and international finances and this takes up so much of their energy that little is left for the concerns of the ordinary citizen. Citizens respond to this by devoting time and resources to ensuring that their voices are heard through engaging in more vocal forms of lobbying, such as protesting or boycotting certain goods. They do this rather than taking part in conventional elections because they think that voting no longer produces the desired results for them (Giddens, 1990; 1991; Norris, 2002; Parry et al, 1992).

A third relevant hypothesis is that protests have become normalised in the post-war period. Politics used to be seen as being either conducted conventionally through voting or unconventionally through protests and other means. There has been an erosion of the idea of protests and alternative politics as unconventional. A key idea here is that young people in particular are adopting a wider conception of the political in comparison to orthodox academia (Marsh et al, 2007). Consequently, alternative political methods are now becoming more accepted by mainstream voters. As a result, of this more individuals are willing to take part in political protests and other forms of alternative political activity, as this no longer requires such a major breach of social and political norms. This, though, is to the detriment of conventional politics because rises in levels of participation in unconventional politic activities are linked to falls in levels of conventional electoral participation (Norris, 2002).

Finally, a further connected issue is that there are differences in levels of participation between age cohorts in different localities. It has been suggested that this is linked to a process of agenda setting based on the local circumstances such as the accessibility of an individual Member of Parliament or the nature of the constituency, for instance, in terms

of its economics or demographic characteristics. Certain agendas may be more or less appealing to young people than others. As a consequence of this young people might choose to take part in some other forms of political activity, such as taking part in a protest march, in certain areas rather than voting (Parry et al, 1992).

### **1.5.2 - The Decline in Party Identification**

The second group of theories attempting to explain the change in the 18-24 cohort's attitudes to voting are referred to collectively as the party identification model. The precursor to the party identification model was the Columbia model (Lazarsfeld et al; 1968). This used large-scale survey research to identify the determinants of American's voting behaviour in the run up to the 1940 presidential election. This work pointed out three important precursors to the party identification model. First, that policy had a different impact on different socio-economic groups. Second, that a significant portion of political learning, particularly regarding attitudes and values, was passed down from parents to children and third, that class groups tended to congregate in distinct geographical areas.

The party identification model was then developed by Campbell et al in *The American Voter* (1964) with a major contribution provided by Butler and Stokes in their influential book *Political Change in Britain* (1974). The model's aim was to develop a theory of how the majority of voters cast their vote and it presumes that most voters stick with one political party or another. In the UK, for example, Butler and Stoke's work (ibid) just considered the near 90% of voters that voted for the Labour Party or Conservative Party in the 1964 general election and ignored the small number that had voted for the Liberals or other parties.

In the party identification model, the likelihood of voting was seen as being determined by the intensity of attachment by individuals to a particular party. The more intense the feelings of attachment to a particular party the greater the likelihood that that person would subsequently vote. Feelings of attachment to a political party tend to increase with age. Hence, this explained to a great degree why the elderly tended to vote more than the younger voters. They had a much more intense and developed class and party identification (Mitchell and Wlezien, 1995; Verba and Nie, 1987).

Party identification in the UK population as a whole has weakened since the mid-1960s. Voters are now less likely to consider themselves strongly attached to a political party. In the 1966 general election 40% of the population strongly identified with the Labour or Conservative party by the 1979 election this had fallen to 19% (Crewe et al, 1977; Crewe, 1983) and to just 6% by the 2010 general election (Park et al; 2012). There is evidence to suggest in British election studies from 1970 onwards that party identification has progressively weakened in the 18-24 cohort too (Clarke et al, 2004). Consequently, it is important to investigate the role of the change in party identification in explaining the change in the 18-24 cohort's attitude to voting.

### **1.5.3 - The General Incentives Model and the Cognitive Mobilisation Model**

A third explanation for changing 18-24 cohort's attitude to voting has its roots in a group of theories that are referred to as rational choice theories. These have had a major impact on ideas regarding attitudes to voting. The starting point for much of this body of work is regarded as Down's *Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957). Downs, drawing on Samuelson (1954) first analysed the nature of public goods. Public goods are items such as street lighting, defence and clean air. The problem with public goods is that they are not excludable and are non-rivalrous. My use of public goods does not mean there is less

for you to consume and even if I pay for it and you do not, I cannot prevent you consuming it. From his analysis, Downs derived a formula, later developed by Riker and Ordeshook (1968), which explained participation in elections and other political activities:

$$PB + D > C$$

The formula explains that the individual must weigh up the probability of their participation being decisive (P): the one vote or extra participant that determines the outcome or success of any collective action or vote and then multiply this by the personal benefits to them (B). This is then added to any benefits that occur through the provision of private excludable goods or other benefits that occur (D) and measured against the costs of participation (C). The problem is that the probability of participation being decisive is very low and the benefits are very low as many goods provided by government are not excludable, as they are public goods. Hence, it is not rational to participate unless private excludable goods or other benefits are also provided alongside the expected benefits of participation in elections. The problem with this explanation is that if there are extra benefits these must be paid for by participants anyway as the costs of these goods must be met. Hence, there is an incentive to free ride: to abstain from voting but benefit from public goods anyway. (Oliver, 1993)

Two models relevant to attitudes to voting, that stem from rational choice theories, the general incentives model and the cognitive mobilisation model, appear to correlate, to a degree, with the present decline in total turnout and together, but not individually, appear to explain a large proportion of the decline. Consequently, they may be important in the change in the attitudes to voting of the 18-24 cohort (Clarke et al, 2004).



The general incentives model takes the basic elements of the rational choice model and suggests that there are some further benefits of participation. It considers two types of benefits: those accruing generally to the whole population and those that accrue solely to those who participate. In addition, it recognises that individuals gain some benefits through expressing themselves and fulfilling their sense of civic duty. It then suggests as with all rational choice models that if the benefits outweigh the costs, individuals will participate (Whiteley and Seyd, 1994; 2002).

The cognitive mobilisation model, on the other hand, starts with the idea that the costs of obtaining information regarding politics have dramatically decreased in the post-war period because of the increasing use of tools, such as the internet, to access information. Over the same period, because of increased levels of education, much of the population has a better ability to use this information. The consequences of this, according to the model, are that individuals become less prepared to rely on party identification to direct their voting behaviour and consequently more volatile in that behaviour. The effect of increased access to information is to increase dissatisfaction with politicians. This increases dissatisfaction with all political parties and leads to a decline in voting (Dalton, 2007; Dalton and Wattenburg, 2002; Nie et al, 1996)

Neither model claims to explain the 18-24 cohort decline specifically (Clarke et al, 2004) but as there is some correlation with total turnout decline, it is beneficial to investigate whether the participant cohort in this study responds to these models.

#### **1.5.4 - Civic Duty**

The fourth group of theories that could be important in explaining the change in 18-24 cohort's attitudes to voting relates to the idea of civic duty. Civic duty is the idea that individual citizens believe that they have some moral and ethical obligation to support the

political community. This can be seen to stem from historical republican ideas of *virtú* and citizenship: the notion that citizens owe a general duty to uphold the interests of other members of the political community (Held, 1987; 1996; 2006).

Civic duty is not a formal duty with sanctions for failing to comply (Simmons, 1981).

Indeed, the literature on the subject suggests that the notion of a civic duty is not something that can be neatly conceptualised or justified: it is perhaps close to what is thought of as a loose obligation to the rest of the political community (See for instance Dworkin, 1978, 1986; Parekh, 1993).

Civic duty is an important feature in a number of theories related to the attitudes to voting. Within rational choice models, the chance that your vote will be decisive and actually be the one vote that determines the outcome of an election is so low that whatever the costs and benefits of voting it seems unlikely that without some other incentive individuals will not vote. In a number of important cases, theorists have turned to the idea of civic duty to explain why voting occurs (see for instance Downs, 1957; Riker and Ordeshook, 1968).

There has been increasing recent international attention paid to the importance of civic duty in relation to attitudes to voting. It has been suggested that a changing belief in civic duty and the values associated with it, is a reason for declining 18-24 turnout in the USA and Canada (see for instance Blais, 2000; Blais et al, 2004; Chareka et al, 2006; Wattenburg, 2007; Zukin et al, 2006). Following on from this international interest, Clarke et al (2004) suggest that a change in civic duty might be an important reason for the change in the 18-24 cohort's attitudes to voting in the UK.

### **1.5.5 - Political Knowledge and Political Sophistication**

The fifth explanation of changing attitudes to voting in the 18-24 cohort focuses on the levels of political knowledge and political sophistication within that cohort. Political knowledge or political sophistication might be considered a measure of the complexity of an individual's thoughts towards politics (Luskin, 1987; 1990). The historical view was that in order to participate in politics an individual needed a good level of political knowledge (Galston, 2001). This was later argued against because it was believed that individuals were able to use various heuristics such as party identification (Campbell et al, 1964; Butler and Stokes, 1974) to overcome a lack of political knowledge and, consequently, be able to carry out activities such as voting (Shapiro, 1998).

The current view is that low levels of political knowledge and political sophistication have two effects in that they both affect the attitudes to voting and the quality of voting. This is because below a certain level of knowledge individuals will start to consider issues such as personality rather than the effect of policies when making voting decisions. As levels of political knowledge diminish further individuals abstain from voting (Carpini and Keeter, 1997; Popkin and Dimock, 1999). Low levels of political knowledge in young people in the UK, if not specifically in the 18-24 cohort, have been linked to declining general election turnout (See Crick, 1998; Jowell and Park, 1998; Mardle and Taylor, 1987; Pirie and Worcester, 1998, Stradling, 1977).

### **1.5.6 - Political Socialisation**

The sixth group of theories that could be important in explaining the change in the 18-24 cohort's attitudes to voting focus on processes of political socialisation. The starting point for work on political socialisation is Hyman's (1969) work *Political Socialisation: a Study in the Psychology of Political Behaviour* where Hyman pointed out that political behaviour

did not simply appear in adults but must start to be generated in the pre-adult and pre-politically active years. Subsequently, a number of studies claimed that some evidence of party identification could be found in pre-teenage children (Easton and Dennis, 1967; 1969; Greenstein, 1965, Hess et al, 2005). The process by which this was supposed to occur, according to these writers, was that young children might initially learn some precursors of adult political views from their parents, such as a nationalist or working class identity or views on the public provision of education. There is some dispute in the field regarding the point at which the majority of political learning takes place but it is apparent that political knowledge becomes increasingly specific and sophisticated rather than generalised as individuals reach adulthood (Weissberg, 1974). The result of this is that when young people reach adulthood they may already be inclined towards a particular political party.

One area of research within political socialisation was a possibly over ambitious desire to find evidence of a link between early apparent party identification and actual adult voting behaviour. This resulted in a series of studies with inconclusive results. Part of the reason for this was the persistent lack of political knowledge displayed by new voters in the UK and elsewhere. This is a phenomenon that is increasing rather than decreasing in magnitude. Young people show increasing disinterest in party politics and know little about major political parties in the UK or their policies (Crick, 1998; Jowell and Park, 1998; Mardle and Taylor, 1987; Pirie and Worcester, 1998, Stradling, 1977). These results caused a long hiatus in this field that has only been overcome in recent years.

Subsequently, there has been some renewed interest in pursuing research into political socialisation on the basis that attitudes formed in children may endure into adulthood and consequently affect, if not determine, political behaviour (Niemi and Hepburn, 1995).

The interest for this study is that attitudes towards voting may well be formed through these processes of political socialisation.

### **1.5.7 - The Importance of Political Efficacy**

A seventh explanation suggests that political efficacy could play an important part in explaining the change in 18-24 cohort's attitudes to voting. The original idea of political efficacy was developed by Campbell et al (1964). It is understood as being composed of two parts: the individual's belief in their own ability to understand and participate in politics and the belief in the ability of the political system to act to fulfil their wishes. These two elements are referred to as internal and external efficacy respectively (ibid). The most important result from this area of research is that the sense of effectiveness in politics or political efficacy in an individual is a good predictor of the likelihood of that individual voting (Blais, 2000). This has been tested in a variety of countries including the USA and the UK (Balch, 1974; Clarke and Acock, 1989; Craig and Maggiotto, 1982; Good and Mayer, 1975; Morrell, 2003; Niemi et al, 1991). There is a variety of different research that contributes to our understanding of internal and external efficacy. Abramson and Aldrich (1982) identify a drop in external efficacy alongside changing party identification as being the cause of falling turnout in the USA. Craig (1979), Craig et al (1990), Fraser (1970) and Hawkins et al (1971) explain that there is a positive relationship but not a causal link between a sense of political efficacy and trust in politicians. Finkel (1985) demonstrated that electoral participation increased levels of belief in external efficacy. So, not only does a belief in the ability of political institutions to fulfil personal preferences increase the likelihood of electoral participation, this belief is increased by electoral participation itself. Pinkleton and Austin (1995) demonstrated that amongst first time American voters that an individual's belief in their

ability to see through to the truth of what politicians were saying in the media related positively to voting intentions. This is an increasingly important area because the majority of political communication is mediated (Crewe and Gosschalk, 1995; Norris and Curtice, 2008) and young people gain much of their political knowledge through mediated source (Loader, 2007; White et al, 2000).

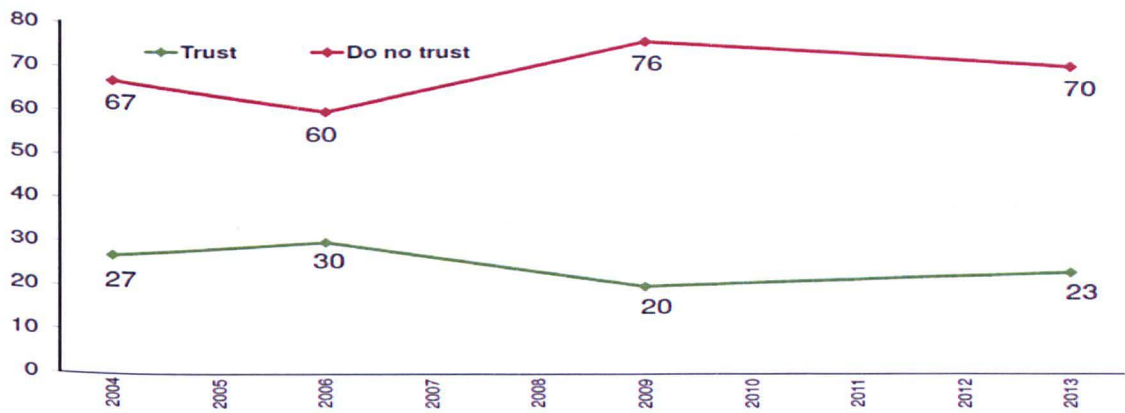
There is a caveat to the importance of political efficacy in this study, research drawing on data from the British Election Study suggests that whilst levels of political efficacy do correlate strongly with the likelihood of voting, there has been little discernible change in the reported levels of political efficacy in the UK since the 1970s (Clarke et al, 2004; Pattie and Johnston, 1998) and more importantly, levels of political efficacy are higher in the 18-24 cohort than older cohorts (Bromley et al, 2004). Therefore, although it is important to consider political efficacy as a reason for the present change in 18-24 attitudes to voting it is at best a contested explanation. Its consideration and importance here is that this idea might contribute to explanations of changing attitudes to voting in the 18-24 cohort.

#### **1.5.8 - A Lack of Trust**

An eighth explanation of the change in 18-24 attitudes to voting focuses on the issue of political trust. Political trust as a concept had its roots in Easton's (1975; 1979) work *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* suggesting that political support was composed of a belief in the legitimacy of government and political trust and that this political trust could work at different levels of the political system. Easton suggests that one could have differing levels of trust for the political community, the idea of democracy, and the regime itself including individual political actors. Political trust was seen as either being specific to a particular element of government or diffuse and related to general support for the system of governance.

The link between electoral participation and political trust has always been important in that a lack of political trust can lead to abstention. Hence, political trust can be seen as an important prerequisite for voting (Levi, 1998). Interestingly, the opposing argument is not true; a surplus of political trust does not necessarily persuade us to vote. There is an important dichotomy regarding what political trust actually means. For some the concept of political trust suggested that political institutions would do what they ought to do or should be doing without constant checks upon them (Gamson and McEvoy, 1970) but for others it meant that the political institutions would act in a proper and reasonable manner (Offe, 1999). A major body of work focuses on political trust and its relationship to voting. An important hypothesis from this body of work is that there are an increasing number of people, across the globe, whom, whilst still strongly supporting democracy have increasing concerns about the performance of politicians (Dalton, 1996; 1998; 2004; Klingemann, 1999; Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995). The main elements of these studies that correlate with the decline in levels of electoral participation are a range of ideas based around the concept of political support including a belief that politicians are crooked, waste resources and are in politics for their benefit rather than citizens. This suggests that the present issues with changing attitudes to voting are connected to the widespread distrust of politicians. Research in the UK shows that both the populace as a whole and young people, in particular, have low levels of trust in politicians and politics (see Chart 1.2 overleaf) (Henn and Foard, 2012; Ipsos Mori, 2010; 2013).

Chart 1.2 – UK Political Trust



Source: Ipsos Mori, 2013

### 1.5.9 - The Current Explanations of Attitudes to Voting: Key Points

I have examined eight explanations of the change in attitudes to voting of the 18-24 cohort specifically or the wider population. These are not all the available explanations but they do provide both a benchmark against which to measure qualitative social psychology, enable prompt questions for later data collection to be devised and could shape the participants' talk and subsequent behaviour.

There are two important points though regarding these eight explanations. First, a number of these theories have been used to explain the attitudes to voting for the majority of the post-war period but have come under greater scrutiny since the decline in UK general election turnout from 1997 (See Clarke et al, 2004; 2009; Whiteley, 2012 for example). This is because explaining the change in the attitudes to voting of the 18-24 cohort has represented a major test of these theories. Some of these theories such as those related to political efficacy and political knowledge have been highly regarded explanations of the attitudes to voting but have found it difficult to explain the present change in attitudes to voting. Consequently, alternative theories such as the idea of a decline in civic duty have come to the fore (ibid).



Second, these are essentially competitive explanations of the attitudes to voting. This is because they are all either normatively or deductively driven theories or models to which empirical evidence has been seen to fit. However, whilst the closeness of fit of different models and theories to empirical evidence leads to certain theories having more credibility than others this is neither causal nor conclusive.

There are important consequences of these ideas. It could be that an examination of participants' talk shows that some explanations are persuasive to them and some are not and the manner and extent to which some of these ideas shape participants' ideas and actions and others do not tell us something about the methodology used and could possibly shed some light on the change in young people's voting behaviour.

## **1.6 - Outline of Thesis**

Having explained the aims of the research, the consequent research questions and explored the topic this chapter will now outline how the rest of the thesis will address the issues posed.

### **1.6.1 - Chapter Two: Methodology**

The second chapter of this thesis will focus on how this study was conducted. Two critical areas will be covered initially. First, the chapter will give a more detailed description of exactly what social constructionist social psychology is, its underlying principles and assumptions and how this might affect the subsequent process of data collection and analysis. This will cover two important areas, the ethics of the study and the manner in which quality was assured within the study. The latter being quite complex in this study because there is a need to discuss issues of quality within this study and this will link to a

discussion of how quality might be assured if the social constructionist social psychology were to be used more widely in political science.

Second, how the topics guide for the interview was designed and tested. This will focus on how the topics guide was drawn from the existing explanations of the change in 18-24 attitudes to voting in UK general elections from 1997 and how this was turned into a set of questions that the interviewees could then respond to. Then the chapter will discuss how these questions were then piloted with a small group of volunteers to ensure that these were effective at producing relevant responses.

Following on from this the chapter then goes on to explain the manner in which the research was conducted. It will consider the process of recruiting the participants, design of the interviews and the consequent process of analysing interview transcripts.

### **1.6.2 - Chapter Three: The Themes Deployed by Participants**

The aim of the third chapter of this thesis is to report the results of this study of the use of social constructionist social psychology. This is the totality of codes and themes identified as being used by the participants that illuminate their attitudes to voting at their first general election. There were four themes identified in this study. This, though, was the result of a number of progressive iterations and refinements. The themes shaped and persuaded participants to vote or to abstain from voting. The themes were linked groups of sub-themes and codes.

The chapter will report:

- explanations of the themes, sub-themes and codes used by the participants;
- examples of the evidence used to show that they have been used by participants;
- and

- explanations of how the codes and sub-themes fit together to form themes and how they shape action in the participants

The first two themes reported broadly shaped the participants towards abstention from voting and the last two themes broadly encouraged voting.

The chapter culminates with a reflective discussion regarding these findings. There were three elements to this: I discuss my personal involvement in the production of the themes and I reflect both on disciplinary and methodological matters. This was an important element of ensuring the quality of the study.

### **1.6.3 - Chapter Four: How the Themes used by Participants Shaped their Propensity to Vote**

The fourth chapter of this thesis developed the analysis of social constructionist social psychology discussed in chapter three. It considers the usefulness of social constructionist social psychology within political science and specifically within aspects of political science related to this thesis. It considers what the study suggests about the utility of this methodology. There are two elements to this. The first is to explore how the participants in this group voted or abstained on the basis of the themes used by them. The second is to then consider how the use of these themes could possibly enhance our understanding of the change in the attitudes to voting of the 18-24 cohort and the existing explanations of this change. The chapter considers elements of the apparent reasons for the attitudes to voting in the participant group and considers any wider implications from those apparent reasons. To achieve this chapter four first reappraises the themes identified in chapter three. It then considers the various the explanations of changes in voting behaviour, that the 18-24 yr. old cohort:

- had become more willing to take part in unconventional political activities such as protests to the detriment of their attitude to voting (Norris, 2002; Parry et al, 1992);
- had declining party identification (Clarke et al, 2004);
- suggested the importance of the general incentives and cognitive mobilisation model together (Clarke et al, 2004) and that the 18-24 cohort;
- had a weakening sense of civic duty (ibid);
- lacked political knowledge and sophistication (Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Popkin and Dimock, 1999);
- had low levels of political efficacy (Balch, 1974; Clarke and Acock, 1989; Craig and Maggiotto, 1982; Good and Mayer, 1975; Morrell, 2003; Niemi et al, 1991);
- had little trust in politicians (Dalton, 1996; 1998; 2004; Klingemann, 1999; Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995) and that the attitude to voting might also relate to;
- processes of political socialisation (Niemi and Hepburn, 1995);

and considers how the themes identified in the participants' talk in chapter three inform these explanations.

The chapter then discusses how the themes as a whole explain the voting behaviour of the participants and what this understanding of the participants' voting behaviour suggests about voting behaviour in wider society. The findings resonate with existing explanations of changes in voting behaviour suggesting that the study has some inherent quality but also sheds some light on that body of work. The chapter reflectively concludes on several key points made indicating how the final chapter will complete the thesis.

## **1.6.4 - Chapter Five: Methodological Reflections: Exploring the use of Social**

### **Constructionist Social Psychology in Political Science Research?**

The final chapter in this thesis aims to consider what this study of social constructionist social psychology can tell us. The chapter considers arguments for the use of social constructionist social psychology within political science: it considers why the social constructionist social psychology provided some illumination to an existing problem. It was clear that the exhaustive coding, reflection, broadly inductive approach, reflection and thematic analysis in social constructionist social psychology could be beneficial in a number of political science research areas. There were also areas within social constructionist social psychology that whilst arguments for the use of social constructionist social psychology had some caveats. These were the process of semi-structured group interviewing and the co-production of talk with the participants. There were arguments against the use of discursive psychology. Social constructionist social psychology as a qualitative methodology has a number of limitations. It is reliant to a degree on the skills of the researcher and interviewers and the willingness of the participants to contribute. Despite these issues, its benefits significantly outweigh its faults.

Finally, the chapter considers the possible uses of social constructionist social psychology in political science. Social constructionist social psychology has not been widely used in political science before and, therefore, an important question is the extent of further exploration that might be required to facilitate greater adoption of the methodology. It is apparent that the key benefit of the methodology lies in its ability to consider and interpret meaning. This is an area of potential benefit to political science. Social constructionist social psychology could be used to illuminate a range of political science

questions. This could be realised either as a stand-alone methodology or if social constructionist social psychology were to supplement an existing quantitative methodology. For similar reasons, it is apparent that social constructionist social psychology could supplement existing qualitative methodologies used in political science such as focus groups or ethnographies but further work would be needed to consider how these goals could be achieved. The chapter concludes by considering the barriers that would need to be overcome to achieve this more wide spread use of social constructionist social psychology and reflects on what this thesis has achieved.

# **Chapter Two**

## **Methodology**

### **2.1 - Introduction**

This chapter explains how this study was conducted. There are two starting points for this explanation. First, in chapter one, it was suggested that the use of qualitative social psychology could be beneficial in political science research. Therefore, it is important to understand exactly what qualitative social psychology is. This chapter will now further explain this approach and the associated ideas of social constructionism, the thematised method and their underlying principles. It will explore how the development of the wider field of qualitative psychology, with which social constructionist qualitative social psychology is closely linked, has shaped the methodology. It will shed light on some of the important issues within the field and the approach this thesis takes to these. There are two overarching issues in this thesis linked to this.

The first is the ethical stance of this research and how it was ensured that participants were treated ethically and fairly particularly within the data collection process. The two most important issues were ensuring that the participants were briefed adequately such that they could give informed consent regarding their participation (British Sociological Association, 2004; British Psychological Society, 2011) and the manner in which social constructionist research can be seen as more ethical than realist approaches by allowing participants more opportunity to speak for themselves.

The second linked overarching issue is the quality of this study. Quality is important in any study but particularly so in this study. This is because the means of establishing the

credibility of research in realist and social constructionist work is based on different epistemic bases. Consequently, a broad discussion of these differences is required.

Second, in chapter one, the existing explanations of changing 18-24 cohort attitudes to voting and the concurrent decline in their turnout were considered. These explanations, because of the link between wider society and academia and the intersubjective nature of talk, should prompt talk about participation in general elections in the participant group. This chapter will show how these explanations were reformulated into a topic guide to achieve this, that was then posed to participants in the study. Consequently, if the response of the participants to questions sheds new light on our understanding of the existing explanations of electoral participation through the way in which participants have talked about them this suggests that our new understanding of these existing explanations is an outcome of the methodology. Furthermore, the extent of these responses and the degree to which they illuminate our understanding may indicate the fruitfulness and usefulness of the methodology.

The chapter will then explain how this study, regarding the use of qualitative social psychology in political science, was conducted. This starts with an explanation of how and why the participants were recruited and the consequent demographics and nature of the participant group. The recruitment process was different from that often undertaken in political science research. This was because of an underlying tension between the realist approaches to sampling commonly used in political science and the social constructionist approach used in this study. The participant group was chosen purposively. The reason it was chosen was to try and ensure that the participant group would use a wide range of talk regarding the general electoral participation. The point of this is that in qualitative social constructionist psychology one would wish to sample talk or discourses rather than



people. In realist approaches, it would be much more common to choose a randomised sample of participants so that the results could be seen to represent a wider reality. Social constructionism instead suggests that there are multiple perspectives on reality and seeking these is the aim of sampling. Efforts were made within this study to find some common ground between both in order to make the study more acceptable and understandable across both approaches. There was an opportunity to show that this group of participants could have taken part in a realist political science study and were not an aberrant group. Consequently, some important measures were undertaken to ensure that the sample was typical of those that might be used in orthodox political science methodologies (Bryman, 2015; Flick, 1998; 2009; Palys, 2008; Patton, 1990).

Finally, the chapter then discusses the data collection method and why semi-structured group interviews were chosen. This begins with a justification of the use of interviews. This is a contested matter within the field of qualitative social psychology with a number of prominent theorists advising against the use of interviews for data collection and instead arguing for the use of what is known as naturally occurring data. The chapter then defines and explores the group interview process. This was a group interview rather than a focus group: a focus group is principally concerned with the work of answering a set of questions determined by the interviewer, a group interview on the other hand allows individual participants to ask each other questions and challenge each other (Flick, 1998; 2009; Patton, 1990). Next, the chapter considers the questioning style used in the interviews highlighting the differences between the questioning techniques used in semi-structured interviews and those used in other types of interviews (Bryman, 2015) and finally this section concludes by explaining how the interview process itself was piloted and tested.

The chapter then moves on to a description of how the interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed, exploring the distinctions between these processes in realist qualitative research methods and qualitative social constructionist social psychology. A key point being that qualitative social constructionist social psychology presumes that the meaning of talk is contextual rather than fixed and, therefore, meaning is in constant flux. Consequently, an excerpt of talk may be coded to a number of different codes. This is followed by an explanation of the subsequent thematised analysis. Thematised social constructionist analysis is characterised by a search for pattern and implication (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Within this study, these processes were focused on differences between voters and non-voters and how what had been said by each group shaped their attitude to voting. This is illustrated over the course of the next two chapters.

## **2.2 - What is Qualitative Social Constructionist Social Psychology and how is it Linked to Thematic Analysis?**

It is sensible to think of qualitative social constructionist psychology as being composed of several nested layers. Social psychology occupies the boundary between the individual and society and explores the psychological interaction between them. This, although not universally accepted, is the orthodox definition of a social psychology (Sapsford et al, 1998; Tedeschi et al, 1985). The term qualitative, in this context, denotes that I am referring to a research methodology or group of methodologies that uses textual rather than numeric data. Social constructionism is a set of epistemic assumptions regarding the social world. Two ideas are particularly important within social constructionism. The first is that there is no objective reality and the partial goal of the research is to then better understand the consequent range of subjective perspectives on issues. The second is that

knowledge or our understanding of it is a joint construction between researchers, participants and the other social actors and institutions involved and that this knowledge is to a degree specific to this context (Lyons and Coyle, 2007; Parker, 2004).

Qualitative social psychology is composed of a wide range of research methodologies and approaches and it is important to understand the field to situate the methods used in this study. One of the ways in which these research approaches can be made sense of relates to how they initially try and analyse data. A number of practitioners in the field use methods that seek to determine themes in their data, and although the rationale underlying these methods differ, they share a number of features in common. Methods such as grounded theory, interpretive phenomenological analysis and thematic analysis share this particular focus. Other approaches used in social psychology such as ethnography and ethnomethodology use some thematic processes in their analysis but they hold to particular philosophical positions to guide their analysis. A third group of methods draw on or are closely linked to quantitative methods such as Q methodology and content analysis. A final significant group of approaches such as discursive psychology and conversation analysis draws on discourse or talk.

Two points are apparent and important. First, thematic analysis whilst not the rationale underlying these methods usually acts as a precursor or starting point for them. Second, social constructionism is an important and influential methodology in all of these methods and dominant in discursive based methods.

Qualitative social constructionist social psychology explores psychological concepts such as attitude formation and behaviour of groups. In contrast to orthodox cognitive psychology and political science, these concepts are seen as socially and discursively constructed: the meaning and shared understanding of these psychological attributes are

formed through the intersubjective process of talk (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter and Wetherell; 1987; Potter and Wiggins, 2007; Wetherell et al, 2001). Consequently, it could be used for exploring an individual's attitude to voting.

An important and relevant implication of social constructionism is that individuals do not use talk consistently rather their talk is dependent on the social context that they find themselves in. It is, therefore, usual that unrehearsed talk features such as:

- contradictions;
- corrections; and
- inconsistencies (Burr; 2003; 2015).

In realist qualitative research, these features of talk are often regarded as problematic noise. For qualitative social constructionist social psychologists, it is these changes in the patterns and purposes of talk, even within one conversation, that is the key to understanding the individual. People construct ideas through talk that services the social context in which they are in and consequently people accomplish or achieve a shared understanding of their own social context through their talk. The ever-changing nature of the microcosms of social interaction is then mirrored in the inherent inconsistencies of conversation and monologues. This approach problematises a broad range of existing methodologies that seek to establish consistent responses from participants because it suggests that these are the product of the research process themselves rather than an underlying reality (Potter and Wetherell, 1988).

This suggests that points of interest to this study, such as the attitude to voting, can only be understood as socially constructed. Individual's talk about their own attitude to voting is dependent on the social situation which they find themselves in, rather than some fixed underlying point of view. To understand attitude to voting, it is necessary to analyse the

qualitative socially psychology of individual talk on the matter but the expectation should be of a constellation of codes and themes rather than a single salient indicator because an individual will hold to a number of different perspectives.

Qualitative social psychology has been used to consider and investigate such topics as:

- age and ageism (see Nikander, 2002);
- attitudes (see Potter, 1998; Potter and Wetherell, 1988);
- education (See Edwards, 1997; Kieran et al 2003);
- emotions (Edwards, 1999; De los Arcos et al, 2009);
- focus groups as a research method (see Edwards and Stokoe, 2004; Puchta and Potter, 2002);
- identity (see Edwards, 1998; Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003);
- ill health (see Horton - Salway, M, 2001; Tucker, 2004);
- institutional practices (see Hepburn and Potter, 2007);
- memory (see Edwards et al, 1992);
- motivation to exercise (see McGannon and Mauws, 2000);
- political ideology (see Reicher and Hopkins, 1996; Weltmann and Billig, 2001);
- the practice of psychoanalysis (see Wetherell, 2003);
- racism (see Buttny, 1999; Tileaga, 2005; Wetherell and Potter, 1992);
- sexuality (see; Clarke et al, 2004; Speer and Potter, 2000);
- treatment of sex offenders ( see Auburn and Lea, 2003); and
- gender (see Edley and Wetherell, 1995; 1997; 1999; 2001).

### **2.2.1 - Antecedents of Qualitative Social Psychology**

Social psychology is a discipline with a history of over a hundred years. Understanding the contribution of qualitative social constructionist social psychology is in part about

understanding the development of the broader field and how this has contributed to and impacted on it.

Social psychology arguably began with Wundt's folk psychology. Wundt studied the effects of language on people's behaviour and his work foreshadowed the thrust and direction of social psychology almost a century later (1916).

The early part of the twentieth century saw a steady growth and development of social psychology both in Europe and North America. A key development was Allport's 1924 work (1994) suggesting that behaviour can be a result of the social context. Throughout the Second World War and the decades immediately afterwards, and perhaps as an effect of the conflict, there was a significant body of work focusing on the transmission of norms. Notable examples include Sherif's work on group behaviour (1935) Lewin's (1939) work on Leadership, Asch's conformity study (1951), Milgram's study on obedience (1963) and Zimbardo's Prison simulation (Haney et al, 1973).

This later developed further to look at the process and dynamics of how those social norms became accepted. Notable examples being Festinger, (1957) work on cognitive dissonance: part of the mechanism by which we change opinions. Bandura produced a number of articles explaining how we learn things from others (1961). Tajfel's (1970) work focused on the process of social groupings and how these influenced our behaviour. Finally, Wiener's work (1986) explained how individuals found explanations for attributing blame socially.

The history of the development of social psychology up to this point shows the increasing dominance of both cognitive and post-positivist realism on the field. In 1973 though, Kenneth Gergen (1973) produced a seminal paper arguing that all knowledge including the psychological was historically and culturally situated.

From this beginning the central tenets of social constructionism, in psychology, began to develop: these included:

- a critical stance towards everyday assumptions
- a belief in the historical and cultural specificity of meaning
- a belief that meaning is derived from the social; and that
- meaning shapes behaviour

### **2.2.2 - The influence of Post-structuralism and the Emphasis on Language**

A significant second line of influence on qualitative social constructionist social psychology came from ideas regarding the place of language in the social and the work of post-structuralists. Early work on language was focused on language as a system of meaning. This began the process of thinking of language as doing something rather than just existing. De Saussure (1983) started with the ideas of the signified and the signifier corresponding to the referent and the word. This was organised into a language system, the *langue*, and individual acts of speech, the *parole*. Similarly, Chomsky (1986; 1988) proposed the idea of structures within language in which an individual would have competence in, as well as in the performance of individual speech acts.

These ideas were developed further by the language philosophers Wittgenstein (1999) and Austin (1975) to show that language can operate as a kind of interactive game between people and that within this game different parts of language have distinct functions. Whilst certain types of utterance, referred to as locutionary, can be understood literally; others, referred to as illocutionary, have meaning that is beyond that which is literally said and are arguably socially dependent. We might ask someone if they could reach a window meaning could they close the window. An illocutionary utterance might then be understood in a further perlocutionary way by the listener (Searle 1969; 1979).

The importance of the work of these theorists to qualitative social constructionist social psychology is that it suggests that there is more to understanding talk than the literal meaning of words and that an element of understanding meaning is both intersubjective, occasioned and based upon the performance of individual talk (Burr, 2003; 2015).

At around the same time as these developments by linguistic philosophers, social scientists in a number of fields began to focus on the idea of language as a structure within society. One prominent idea came from the field of anthropology. This was a notion commonly known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. There were two versions of this. The weaker version suggested that the way language is used in particular societies can influence consequent behavioural traits within that society. The stronger version suggested that the construction of language within a society determines thought processes and behaviour within that society (Gumperz and Levinson, 1996; Harre and Muhlhausler, 1990; Wetherell et al, 2001). The importance of this hypothesis for qualitative social constructionist social psychology was that it suggested that language could constitute behaviour.

A further important contribution came from Marxist thought. A group of Marxist linguists formed around an academic called Mikhail Bakhtin (Holquist, 1990; Todorov, 1984). The Bakhtin circle saw language as a process of dialogic struggle between individual voices wanting to be heard and the dogmatic linguistic discourses used by the institutions within societies. The consequences of this for the individual were that they were faced with a multitude of different voices: the self became both a product of this dialogue and subordinate if not completely undermined by their overwhelming presence. What was spoken or uttered by individuals then was the intertextual product of these different discourses. This mass of voices and patterns of discourses Bakhtin referred to as



heteroglossia. Within this multitude of voices, though certain social contexts resulted in recognisable patterns of speech between individuals and across societies, these were what the members of the Bakhtin circle referred to as speech genres (Holquist, 1990; Todorov, 1984). Bakhtinian ideas were particularly important in the development of discourse analysis and qualitative social constructionist social psychology. The notions of conflict within language and the notion of recognisable patterns in language are important ideas within both qualitative social constructionist social psychology and the wider field of discourse analysis.

More recently, the writings of Foucault have had a profound impact on the development of the idea of how discourses shape society. Foucault thought of a discourse as a regular set of linguistic signs for representing a particular topic. Foucault adopted a social constructionist approach to this, in much the same way as earlier anthropologists and the Bakhtin circle, arguing that it is only through language or discourses that the meaning behind events and ideas can be understood. This was then linked to power structures within society as some meanings became available for particular groups to use and others were not. Foucault, for instance, explains the history of the idea of madness and notes how it has changed over time and that this change serves to benefit certain sectors of society such as the medical profession over others, such as those deemed mentally ill (Foucault, 2001; 2002; Hook, 2001).

When forms of language appear to regularly support a particular purpose Foucault referred to these forms of language as discursive formations. The individual becomes the subject of those discursive formations and their knowledge of themselves, their sense of self, is constructed through these. We might consider ourselves sane but we can only understand the idea of sanity through the discursive formation of madness (Foucault,

2001; 2002; Potter, 1996; Wood and Kroger, 2000). The work of Foucault contributed to a number of ideas within discourse analysis and qualitative social constructionist social psychology. There has been a focus on power, drawing on the work of Foucault in particular, within some parts of this field that will be returned to later in this chapter.

The second line of influence on qualitative social constructionist social psychology had a more agency-based approach. This was conversation analysis. Conversation analysis began with Garfinkel's development of ethnomethodology. Garfinkel was interested in studying the methods individuals use to create their identity and the social in everyday situations such as when individuals visit their doctor. The question was what does an individual accomplish in achieving the identity of a doctor's patient? The sense that individuals make of these situations must be shared so that they can interact with others. Consequently, it can be studied. Garfinkel thought that these everyday interactions were governed by rules and to explore and determine these rules he would deliberately attempt to break them. The method he developed was known as a breaching experiment. Garfinkel would break a supposed rule in order to see how individuals reacted (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984).

Conversation analysis was a direct development of Garfinkel's work. Conversation analysis was the study of what happened in everyday speech and focused on the work and interaction individuals do in talk and the rules that govern it. Conversation analysis focuses on the orderly and sequential positioning of interaction in naturally occurring talk. Any spoken item will largely be dictated or dependent on a prior spoken item and this is usually the previously spoken item. Consequently, each turn in talk is linked (Sacks; 1984; Sacks et al, 1974; Schlegoff, 1972a; 1972b). Conversation analysis has been extremely influential in the development of certain sub-fields of qualitative social

constructionist social psychology because it lends itself to a fine-grained analysis of what is actually being said and a focus on the individual.

### **2.2.3 - Key Issues within the Method**

Within qualitative social constructionist social psychology, three significant and broad research approaches have emerged. At one extreme there is conversation analysis that focuses on the microcosm of individual conversations. At the other extreme is Foucauldian discourse analysis that finds meaning and implication in the broad sweep of societal wide discourses. Occupying the centre ground and borrowing from both of these approaches is discursive psychology (Burr, 2003; 2015).

The strong influence of both Foucauldian analysis and conversation analysis has not been problem free on qualitative social constructionist social psychology. Whether the focus of qualitative social constructionist social psychology should be on either the micro-analytic style of conversation analysis or the broad societal reach of Foucauldian discourse is particularly controversial and problematic in the field (see for instance Ten Have, 2006; Wetherell, 1998; Wooffitt, 2005)

This leads to four important issues that affect both discourse analysis and qualitative social constructionist social psychology. They are important because they represent major cleavages within qualitative social constructionist social psychology and because this study adopts a particular stance on these issues. These cleavages derive in significant part because of ontological and epistemological differences between the post-structuralist Foucauldian analysis influence and the conversation analysis influence on the field (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002; Wood and Kroger, 2000; Wetherell et al, 2001; Wooffitt, 2005)

The first of these cleavages is an argument regarding the importance of the context of the data and the extent to which the findings relate to broader social issues. Conversation analysts prefer to consider data as distinct from the external environment and those driven more by Foucault see data situated in a wider context (Wetherell et al, 2001). For conversation analysts, the idea that the data is affected by events outside of its immediate context is too big a presumption to make without evidence from within the data itself that this has taken place (Schlegoff, 1999a). The alternative conception is that it would be impossible for the participants not to be affected by the wider world. This thesis follows a more Foucauldian framework on this point and makes the presumption that the talk of the participants is connected to societal discourses regarding attitudes to voting realised through the codes and themes identified in their talk.

A second issue is the extent to which researchers regard themselves as critical. Critical theory is a hypothesis that developed from Marxist and Bakhtinian thought and was furthered by post-structuralist writers. This suggests that all human and societal notions and ideas are formed within and from a socially constituted socio-historical mesh of power relations. The consequence of this is that the researcher should morally adopt a politicised and emancipatory approach to research: one should perceive the way in which the present unequal society is a product of present and prior discourses related to power and knowledge and attempt to rectify this inequality through the research process (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2002; Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002; Fairclough, 1985; 1995; 2001; Fairclough et al; 2011; Wetherell et al, 2001).

The extent to which one is then, consequently, critical within research is dependent on at least two issues. First, the extent to which the researcher regards themselves as necessarily adopting a political and emancipatory stance with respect to the research and

the research outcomes: recognising that they themselves are part of the mesh of power relations. Second, the extent to which they then regard research data as inherently politicised (ibid).

Within discourse analysis and qualitative social psychology, there are two distinct approaches to this issue. The majority of researchers see that adopting a critical stance and assuming that the social is permeated by social power relations as both moral and inescapable (see for instance Billig 1999a; 1999b; Wetherell et al, 2001). In contrast to this, those researchers adopting an approach drawing more heavily on conversation analysis take heed of the methodological concerns of Schlegoff (1999a; 1999b). Schlegoff suggests that to assume something is in the data means that you cannot prove that it is there in the first place and, therefore, it is better to enter the research process presuming that nothing is there.

Within this thesis, it is necessary to adopt two-fold approaches to this issue. The idea that all of society is within a socially constituted web of power relations is an important presumption within this thesis. The idea that the structures within talk constitute both the power relations and the meaning behind attitudes to voting is a central underlying idea in this research. However, it is also important to take the comments of Schlegoff seriously and not enter the research predisposed towards a particular political viewpoint. If an emancipatory approach is taken a presumption will be being made about the causes of attitudes to voting and abstention that could shape the results of this thesis. This thesis is, therefore, making the presumption that there are power relations across society but not what they are or how they will inform the research questions.

A third key issue relates to the understanding of the self or individual identity within qualitative social psychology. Drawing on the work of Bakhtin (Holquist, 1990; Todorov,

1984), the self is understood as the product of the internalisation of the variety of societal wide discourses that impact upon it. The individual self is the relational, decentred and unstable product of these discourses achieving temporary closures by accepting a particular position for a limited period of time (Hall, 1996a). Again, though, the extent to which the individual has choice within this process is broadly a matter of whether the researcher is principally influenced by the Foucauldian perspective or conversational analysis. The former suggesting that identities are temporary attachments to particular positions constructed through discourses (Hall, 1996b); the latter suggesting that individuals deploy particular positions and discourses as resources in talk (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). This thesis adopts a middle way, in common with a number of practitioners, suggesting that individual identity is both the product of discourses and individual production and deployment of those discourses, realised in this study through the codes and themes identified in the talk of participants.

A final connected issue is that which Wetherell et al (2001) refers to as the autonomy of the data. Schlegoff (1997) makes several key points on this subject. He, first, argues that conversation analysis should have primacy of method over other forms of analysis.

According to Schlegoff, this is because determining the impact of a societal structure in talk is only possible with a detailed analysis of that talk. Schlegoff then attempts to demonstrate this through re-analysis of critically examined texts. He then suggests that societal categories such as mother mean something within a particular piece of talk only if they can be shown to be relevant to the talk taking place. So, according to Schlegoff, we cannot impose an explanatory term such as mother on an individual when they are, for instance, talking about their experience of work (ibid).

Wetherell (1998) uses the term subject positions when referring to what Schlegoff refers to as societal categories. In response to Schlegoff (1997), Wetherell (1998) demonstrates that the subject positions that people adopt and the interpretive repertoires or discourses that people use also have an impact on the way in which turns are taken in conversation. Rather than arguing for a primacy of one particular method, of structure over agency, Wetherell suggests that there is value to be achieved in the synthesis of the approaches in the incorporation of conversation analysis and critical discourse analysis in what is discursive psychology. This thesis adopts a similar approach to this issue.

### **2.3 - Ethics**

There were two broad issues that were linked to the methodological approaches taken in this study. The first of these was the ethics of the planned research. The starting point for assessing the ethics of this study was the consideration of the possible risks to participant welfare and well-being within the study. Whilst it is not possible for a researcher to always predict all sources of harm that may affect participants, there is a moral responsibility on researchers to anticipate and guard against harm to research participants (British Sociological Association 2004; British Psychological Society, 2011).

Three areas of concern were noted.

The first of these areas was the interview process. The social constructionist qualitative interview has been seen as a relatively beneficial instrument of data collection, this is partly because it allows and accommodates the multiple voices and perspectives each participant in a research study may have to be heard rather than compelling them to fix on one principal response (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). In recent decades, however, a number of concerns with this method of data collection have been highlighted. These include that:

- the interviewer or researcher is the sole designer of the process;
- the questioning is usually one way, from the interviewer to the participant;
- the interview is solely for the benefit of the researcher;
- interviews usually involve some manipulation of participants such that they answer the questions that the researcher wants answering;
- the interviewer is the only person allowed to interpret what the interviewee has said; and
- there is discourse in modern society that equates the interview with a confessional encouraging participants to disclose more than they would ordinarily choose to.

(Brinkman and Kvale, 2005; Hepburn and Potter, 2005; Kvale, 2007)

This has led to a general critique regarding the balance of power in the interview situation between the participant and the researcher (Hoffmann, 2007). These issues could be accentuated in this study because although the participants in this study were all adults, they were relatively young in comparison to me, the interviewer, and the research topic was presumed to be novel to them.

Within this study, the use of group interviews served to limit some of these problematic and unethical effects, particularly those related to imbalances of power between the researcher and the participants. It was hoped that the individual participants would direct comments to each other rather than all the questions coming from the researcher and this, to an extent, happened. If the dialogue was freely flowing between the participants, and the research topic areas were being addressed, I would stay silent.

There were still areas of concern. It was foreseen that some of the participants could say or discuss things that they later found embarrassing or uncomfortable and that this could



be considered to be psychologically harmful in extreme cases (British Sociological Association, 2004; British Psychological Society, 2011).

The second area of concern revolved around the issue of informed consent. One important point was that it was not necessarily reasonable to give a participant a fully detailed and technical briefing on the research. Participants might not be able to understand this or the ramifications of participating in research. Hence, choices need to be made regarding which elements of the research participants need to know and what they do not need to know or rather are in a position to appreciate and understand without technical training. This leads to the idea that research briefings for the participants need to be edited to aid understanding. This is a problematic idea because the notion of informed consent leads to the idea that participants should be given full information to make a decision however what is actually required is a full understanding. There may also be issues that participants need to consider, such as the potential implications of publication from research, which would not ordinarily be put in a briefing for participants. However, it is important to be cautious when withholding information from participants and it should only be done to further participant's understanding (British Sociological Association, 2004; British Psychological Society, 2011). Hence, the information given to participants is a matter of judicious choice and researcher craft. Participants have a need to be as informed as far as possible regarding the research that they are participating in but this information needs to be presented in an appropriate form such that individuals without expertise can understand it.

The key concept in this study was valid consent: defined as where a participant agrees to take part in the study on the basis of the fullest possible understanding of what their involvement in the research would entail and the possible implications and consequences

of this. There were several different underlying aspects within the idea of valid consent that also need to be considered. First, it was realised that participants would need to give consent for any parts of the research that were subsequently published and they would have an enduring right to anonymity as part of that. Second, because of the potentially limited nature of participants' consent, participants would need to be informed of their ability to withdraw from the study at any point. Finally, the participants would need to be informed of the aim and objectives of the proposed study and how it may affect them in the future (British Sociological association, 2004; British Psychological Society, 2012; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Homan, 1991).

A final area of concern was that the participants had an ongoing right of privacy and, therefore, a reasonable expectation of confidentiality. There were two issues that sprang from this. First, it was made clear to participants that they had a right at any time not only to withdraw from the study but also to ask for any data collected regarding them to be destroyed. Second, they were also made aware that any data or research records related to them would be anonymised in the event of publication and held securely and only used for the purpose for which they were collected in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 (British Sociological association, 2004; British Psychological Society, 2011; Homan, 1991). This also served to ameliorate the potential harm caused by participants making comments that they later saw as embarrassing.

An overview of some of the actions to address these issues was set out in a combined consent form and participant brief (see box 2.1 overleaf). This was discussed with potential participants prior to the research and participants signed this and were given a copy of the document.

### Box 2.1- CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

RESEARCH TITLE: Exploring the use of Qualitative Social Psychology in Political Science:  
Discursive Themes of an 18-24 Cohort shaping their Propensity to Vote – *How the way in  
which we talk about politics affects our choice to vote*

PRINCIPAL RESEARCHER: Mark Cole

PURPOSE AND DURATION: This research focuses on the reasons why people choose to vote or not vote in general elections. It is part of a supervised Open University higher degree and is being carried in order to partially meet the requirements of that degree. It will focus on the way in which people talk about voting and not voting. It will initially take no more than an hour and a half of your time but I may wish to ask you in for a few further questions. If so, these further questions should last no more than half an hour.

PROCEDURES: You will be asked to fill in a short questionnaire before the interview.

COSTS, RISKS, AND DISCOMFORT: There are no costs, risks or discomfort associated with this study.

BENEFITS: There are no direct benefits to you besides the educational experience of participating in the research. However, I expect that the results will help to explain people's involvement in politics and add to the body of knowledge on the subject.

CONFIDENTIALITY: The results of this study may be published in a scholarly book or journal, presented at professional conferences or used for teaching purposes. However, your name and other identifiers will not be used in any publication or teaching materials.

COMPENSATION: I will reimburse any reasonable out of pocket expenses provided they are agreed beforehand and you supply me with a receipt

REQUEST FOR MORE INFORMATION: You may ask more questions about the study at any time. Please e-mail the principal investigator at [mark.cole@tvu.ac.uk](mailto:mark.cole@tvu.ac.uk) or telephone 01189 675820 with any questions or concerns about the study. Further information may also be sought by contacting the research supervisor Professor Michael Saward by email at [m.j.saward@open.ac.uk](mailto:m.j.saward@open.ac.uk) or telephone on 01908 659320

WITHDRAWAL OF PARTICIPATION: Should you decide at any time during the study that you no longer wish to participate, you may withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation without having to give any reason. Any data supplied will be destroyed on request up to 31/12/12.

SIGNATURE: I confirm that the purposes of the research, the study procedures, and the benefits have been explained to me and that all my questions have been answered. I have read this consent form. My signature below indicates my willingness to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher Signature

## 2.4 – Validity or Quality?

A second key overarching issue in this study was the differences in approaches to quality between qualitative social psychology and social constructionism, on one hand, and realist-dominated political science on the other. I felt that this was important because the quality of a study is something that is only seen in the negative. There are many examples of academic work that have been criticised because they are of poor quality. It is rare that articles are lauded because of the quality of their method. Quality acts as a benchmark below which scholarly outcomes are disregarded or considered as examples of what not to do. The problem with this is that quality is framed in terms of the underlying epistemic and ontological assumptions of each methodological approach.

Within realist approaches to both psychology and political science quality is framed in terms, drawing upon the hard sciences and statistical methodology, of validity and reliability.

There are a number of different types of validity which are important in realist studies and could be seen to be relevant in a study of this type. Internal validity is a measure of the extent to which causal relationships can be seen in research design and extraneous variables do not affect results. External validity and the similar idea of ecological validity relate to the extent that a study can be seen to mirror wider society.

Consideration of the internal validity of research is more complex. That research is internally valid is, to an extent, dependent on the process of measurement used as well as the research design. There are three areas to consider. These are criterion validity, construct validity and content validity. The first of these ideas, criterion validity, is the process of measuring research outcomes against what they predict: would the results of this research, for example, be able to predict voting behaviour in 18 -24 yr. olds? This

could be verified after the research was completed. Construct validity refers to the extent to which concepts created within the research process actually represent what they claim to represent. This can be achieved through a variety of methods. It is possible, for example, to show some construct validity by demonstrating convergence between concepts used in one study and another. In this study, it is possible to see a link between codes and themes taken to represent civic duty and the attitude to voting and a similar link between civic duty and attitude to voting has been found in other studies (see Clarke et al, 2004). The final measure of internal validity is content validity. This is principally the extent that the study appears to measure what it presumes to. This is commonly known as face validity.

There has been a range of critiques regarding this realist perspective regarding quality from a social constructionist perspective and consequently social constructionists tend to use the term quality rather than validity. There are two broad areas of critique. The first of these suggest that realist research routinely fails to meet its own quality criteria (Parker, 2004). The justification and discourse of quality can be used to defend and account for a particular methodological viewpoint irrespective of an underlying reality (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984). Moreover there are good reasons to suggest that the quality criteria used should not be so fixed. It is apparent that fixed quality criteria can stifle methodological innovation (Elliot et al; 1999).

The second issue focuses more on the contrasting epistemology and ontology. The major conceptual frameworks of realism suggest that there is one reality that can be experienced. As a consequence of this, different means of accessing this reality can be seen as more or less valid. In contrast to this, social constructionism suggests that there are different perspectives and understanding of reality which are equally warrantable.

Consequently, ideas of singular perfectly valid viewpoint make little sense in social constructionism. Similarly, ideas of reliability, that measures can remain fixed over time, make little sense to social constructionism in what is seen as a dynamic social world (Parker, 2004).

Issues of validity in realist approaches tend to be resolved by attempts to make the researcher and the research process more objective. This possibility is rejected by social constructionism. Rather it is suggested that the researcher is always involved in the research process and always takes a stance towards the research (Hollway, 1989). As the researcher is involved in some sense then it is important to understand and appreciate that involvement as part of the quality process of the research.

There has been a range of ideas developed within qualitative social constructionist social psychology to then address issues of quality. This has included:

- developing a discriminating awareness of the research;
- recycling or going through a research process several times;
- authentic collaboration or working as part of a critical group;
- falsification or continuously testing for alternative conclusions; and
- an expectation of chaos and confusion as part of the research process

(Reason and Riley, 2003; Reason and Heron, 1994)

The thrust of these approaches are to establish quality by recognising:

- complexity;
- coherence within studies;
- the temporal and cultural situatedness of language;
- new problems created; and to develop
- fruitful interpretations;



- represent the voices and views of participants; and
- a reflexive, iterative stance to the research process.

(Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Lather, 1993; Mctaggart; 1998; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell et al, 2001)

This study takes note of these ideas regarding the establishment of quality. The principal aspects of establishing used in this study, though, were the reporting of large portions of the data, constant comparison, reflection and member and peer checking. The last element being an effective part of group interviews (Flick, 1998; 2009; Patton, 1990).

Selected excerpts of the interview transcripts are included in chapter three and it is planned to publish all of the interview transcripts online shortly. It was impractical to include all the transcripts in the thesis, because of their size, which in total amounted to 185 pages. The forthcoming publication will allow others to re-examine the raw data and come to their own conclusions regarding this study. The constant comparison process involved comparing each new occurrence of a code with a large proportion of the corpus of data and the other examples of the code. This was achieved partly through the use of software to search for keywords in the data corpus. The aim was to continuously refine the occurrences and definitions of the codes. An important process of improving the quality was participant and peer confirmation. Participant confirmation occurred during the last six interviews and after the final interview. This was a process of discussion of the codes and themes that had been identified and asking whether the participants agreed or did not agree with that identification and consequent interpretation of the codes and themes as they emerged. Peer checking, on the other hand, whilst involving similar processes occurred throughout the research process. At regular intervals, I would meet



with my supervisors and they would then look through transcripts coding and themes and consider whether my coding and themes made sense and were recognisable to them.

The final critical and overarching action to develop the quality of the study was to be reflective and report that reflectivity through the research process.

## **2.5 - Questioning Participants about their Attitude to voting**

The second important issue in this chapter is the prompt questions that will be asked of the participants in this study. These are crucial to understanding the use of this methodology. The questions posed to the participants are the means through which talk related to both the existing explanations of the change in the 18-24 cohort general election participation and the participants' own views regarding attitudes to voting are shaped. Elements of the quality and results of this research will be understood in light of these questions. Consequently, it is important to understand the rationale behind the questions and the nature of the responses that each of the questions was attempting to provoke.

In chapter one, the existing explanations of the change in the attitude to voting in the 18-24 cohort were explored. The existing explanations suggested that the cohort:

- had become more willing to take part in unconventional political activities such as protests to the detriment of their attitude to voting (Norris, 2002; Parry et al, 1992);
- had declining party identification (Clarke et al, 2004);
- suggested the importance of the general incentives and cognitive mobilisation model together (Clarke et al, 2004) and that the 18-24 cohort;
- had a weakening sense of civic duty (ibid);

- lacked political knowledge and sophistication (Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Popkin and Dimock, 1999);
- had low levels of political efficacy (Balch, 1974; Clarke and Acock, 1989; Craig and Maggiotto, 1982; Good and Mayer, 1975; Morrell, 2003; Niemi et al, 1991);
- had little trust in politicians (Dalton, 1996; 1998; 2004; Klingemann, 1999; Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995) and that the attitude to voting might also relate to;
- processes of political socialisation (Niemi and Hepburn, 1995).

These existing explanations were then developed into a number of groups of questions that the participant could respond to, a topic guide. The aim of the topic guide was to direct the data collection: thus ensuring that the participants had opportunities to discuss a wide range of discourses related to electoral participation and the existing explanations of attitude to voting discussed in chapter one. The topic guide was comprised of eleven main groups of questions and a variety of follow-up questions which were dictated by the responses of the participants. Although, due to the free flowing nature of the data collection process, participants often discussed question before they were voiced by the interviewer and the questions were often used in a different order. The topic guide then reverted to a tool to ensure that the participants had discussed all the questions. An expanded version of the topic guide explaining the purpose of each question and my thoughts on it is in table 2.1 overleaf. This highlights how the questions were linked to the explanations of attitude to voting. A number of questions were rephrased and asked again at various points in the interviews to ensure participants had ample opportunity to respond and this is indicated in the topic guide.

Table 2.1 – Expanded Topic Guide

Question Group	Questions	Purpose
1	<p>Did you vote at the last general election and what is your voting history?</p> <p>Why did you choose to vote or not vote on the various occasions?</p>	<p>Question group one was initially designed to check the participant’s voting history and then allowed a range of answers that could have related to the reasons for not voting or voting discussed in chapter one. It was reasonable to expect some participants to suggest that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• they were apathetic towards politics (Crewe et al, 1977);</li><li>• voted out of a sense of civic duty (Clarke et al, 2004);</li><li>• they were party identifiers (Campbell et al, 1964; Butler and Stokes, 1974); or</li><li>• that they should not vote because of low levels of political knowledge (Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Popkin and Dimock, 1999).</li></ul> <p>This question and the next two were particularly aimed at giving participants opportunities to discuss the second, fourth and fifth explanation of attitude to voting as discussed in chapter one. As this was the first</p>

		question asked I felt it was important that this question got the participants to feel at ease.
2	Do you think people should vote? Are there good reasons which might make you think you should vote or not vote?	Question group two usually asked midway through the interviews, was a further opportunity for participants to respond to the explanations of attitudes to voting prompted by question one.
3	If you were at a social engagement just after an election and somebody asked you if you had voted, what would you say? How would you explain your decision?	Question group three usually asked at the end of the interviews was a final prompt to encourage participants to respond to the explanations of attitudes to voting prompted by question one.
4	<p>Have you ever been involved in any of the following activities?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Protesting;</li> <li>• campaigning on local and national issues;</li> <li>• working for political parties</li> </ul>	Question group four probed whether or not the participants were involved in different forms of political activity other than voting and explored the extent that the participants felt alienated (Crewe et al, 1977) from conventional politics: whether they could be regarded as trying to form a different type of politics. The aim was to consider the extent that the participants regarded conventional

	<p>or pressure groups; or</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• contacting politicians.</li> </ul> <p>Describe why you took part?</p>	<p>politics as normal or sought other forms of political activity such as protesting in preference to electoral participation and whether this might be related to a new or different political attitude in younger generations (Inglehart, 1997; 2015; Norris, 2002; Parry et al, 1992). This and the following group of questions allowed participants to discuss the first explanation of attitude to voting considered in chapter one.</p>
5	<p>Do you think your vote makes a difference? Do parties consider what people want before they decide what they will do?</p>	<p>Question group five asked the participants to explore the extent to which they felt that politicians did or did not relate to them. The questions were again looking for participants to explore notions of young people being different from the older generations. There was, however, more of a possibility with this question of participants discussing life cycle issues: that changes in attitude to voting were partly because of changes related to the age of the participants (Goerres, 2006; Jennings, 1979; Stoker and Jennings 1995).</p>

6	<p>Can you see benefits to voting or not voting?</p> <p>What are they and how do you actually benefit?</p>	<p>Question group six related to rational choice models of voting and, therefore, allowed participants to make comments related to important variants of them such as Whiteley's (Whiteley and Seyd, 2002) general incentive model. Answers to this question could relate to the third explanation of attitude to voting given in chapter one.</p>
7	<p>Do you accept what political parties tell you?</p> <p>Do you trust political parties to do what they have said they will do?</p> <p>What are your reasons for responding in the way that you have?</p>	<p>Question groups seven and eight focused on individual efficacy: that individuals believe they have the competence to take part in politics (Balch, 1974; Clarke and Acock, 1989; Craig and Maggiotto, 1982; Good and Mayer, 1975; Morrell, 2003; Niemi et al, 1991). This was the sixth explanation of attitude to voting discussed in chapter one. There were a</p>
8	<p>Do you accept what candidates tell you? Do you trust candidates to do what they have said they will do? What are your reasons for responding in the way that you have?</p>	<p>number of important follow up question to these questions that related to the extent that the participants knew about what government was doing and where they got their information from. These gave participants, first, the opportunity to respond focusing specifically regarding the extent to which the media related to their sense of internal efficacy (as in Pinkleton and Austin, 1995).</p>

		<p>Second, it gave participants the opportunity to comment on the cognitive mobilisation model and to consider whether their attitude to voting was related to changes in their ability to understand the media (see Dalton, 2002, 2007; Nie et al, 1996).</p>
9	<p>Were you brought up to believe that voting was important? Has the way in which your parents voted affected you?</p>	<p>Question groups nine and ten with follow-up questions explored the process of political socialisation (Hyman; 1969): the process of learning about politics from parents and others and sought to explore the level of political knowledge in the participant group. This was the seventh explanation of attitude to voting discussed in chapter one.</p>
10	<p>Do you think that the way in which people understand and believe in politics has changed over time? Can you explain why?</p>	
11	<p>To what extent do you think the way the country vote determines what government does? Why?</p>	<p>Question group eleven asked participants about the extent to which they believed the government has the capacity to do what it says it will do. These questions related to issues of trust in government and the efficacy of government to carry out its manifesto in the</p>

		face of global pressures (Abramson and Aldrich, 1982; Finkel, 1985). This was the eighth explanation of attitude to voting discussed in chapter one.
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**2.6 - The Participants: Recruitment and Consequent Demographics**

The nature of the participants that take part in any study can have an important influence on the consequent outcomes. As the aim of this study was to consider the possibilities of using a research method, unusual in political science, it was not necessary to use a random sample of participants: rather, it was determined that a purposive sample would be sufficient. There were still a number of important factors to consider to ensure that the participant group was fit for the purpose intended within this study. It was important that there was a rationale underlying the participant group acceptable to both social constructionist social psychology and realist political science to ensure that the completed thesis would be valued by academics from both fields. Purposive samples in realist qualitative research can be selected on the basis that they are characterised by extreme, critical, sensitive or typical cases or that there is maximal variation within the sample (Bryman, 2015; Flick, 1998; 2009; Patton, 1990; Palys, 2008). However, in qualitative studies based on social constructionism, the aim is usually to sample discursive practices. This is not based on the type of people involved in a research study rather the range of talk that they deploy (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Yates et al; 2001). In this study participants were chosen on the basis that they were typical cases: that they shared a number of relevant characteristics of the target population (Williams, 2002) which was the 18-24 UK cohort. The reason for using typical cases was it was felt that an exploration



of a methodology using typical cases would afford better evidence of its usefulness than an exploration using cases chosen by another criterion but it was also presumed that this would afford reasonable opportunity to access maximal discursive practices. The decision to use a typical sample of participants then led to further concerns and the realisation that:

- it was important to establish that a cohort of participants drawn mainly from the Reading area, the venue of the research study, could be considered typical: that Reading in terms of its population's political behaviour was typical;
- the participants in this study as a sample of the 18-24 age cohort could also be considered typical; and that
- the participant group could be considered sufficiently large for the purposes of the study (Bryman, 2015).

The first of these concerns has already been addressed. In the first chapter, a variety of methods were used to show that Reading was an appropriately typical site with regard to electoral participation to conduct the research. That the decline in general election participation in the Reading constituencies almost exactly mirrors the national decline suggests that the proposition that the Reading population's attitude to voting is typical in term of the population as a whole is reasonable.

The most important factor affecting the second concern, the typicality of the participants, was the process of recruitment. There are a variety of methods used to recruit participants for research studies including placing adverts in local newspapers or on the internet, direct recruitment through processes such as handing out fliers in public spaces or using a snowballing technique where one participant is used to assist with the

recruitment of others (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Patrick et al, 1998; Sapsford, 2006).

Recruiting participants proved difficult and the initial approaches attempted or considered were not successful or practical. Consequently, a snowballing technique was used to recruit participants (ibid). A short presentation regarding the research was given to students at the Further Education College in Reading where the data collection was to take place. The presentation highlighted the importance of the research and how valuable participants' opinions were to it. Potential participants were asked not only if they would be prepared to participate but also if they had friends outside the college that might be willing to take part. These possible participants were then approached via the initial participant. This was a pragmatic recruitment process that was far from ideal. The main concern with this method was that the sample might have been unusual and might not use as wide a range of discursive practices as I would have liked nor been seen as typical of studies into electoral participation.

Consequently, efforts were made to ensure that the demographics of participants were considered prior to selection and the participant group fitted a rough sampling framework mirroring the population as a whole. This was partly achieved through the use of a simple pre-interview questionnaire (box 2.2 overleaf).

A final concern was the size of the sample. Within qualitative social constructionist social psychology, it is common to use under ten interviews. This is because, as previously mentioned the object of study is the use of language in use rather than the individual. The key point, within qualitative social constructionist social psychology, is that the number of participants should be appropriate to the research question (Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

## Box 2.2 - Pre interview Questionnaire

Name: .....

Contact Telephone Number .....

Alternative Number (If Applicable) .....

Address .....

Email Address .....

Age: .....

Gender: .....

Ethnic Origin: .....

Occupation: .....

Would you be prepared to undertake further interviews if required?.....

Did you vote at the last general election .....

Would you consider yourself a supporter of a particular political party?.....

The initial aim of this study was to recruit forty participants split equally between voters and non-voters. The reason for this was that, as this was an exploration of a methodology unusual to political science, it was important to have a sample that would be seen as sufficiently robust across a broad range of qualitative research paradigms and could be seen as robust from a realist political science perspective. The number of participants used in many realist qualitative studies whatever the methodology is often determined by a concept borrowed from grounded theory referred to as theoretical saturation (Bryman, 2015). Theoretical saturation suggests that data collection continues until further data collection results in no further new codes and existing codes are sufficiently represented

(Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Within social constructionist and thematised research similar processes occur but researchers would perhaps be considering whether new codes or discourses were being identified. These processes are not always straightforward, however, for two reasons. First, because the majority of data collection is characterised by the notion of diminishing returns: the discovery of new data does not neatly finish but rather subsides leaving a very long tail (Green and Thorogood, 2009; Guest et al, 2006). Second, because coding is a tentative process and codes can be started only to be discarded at a later stage in the analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). In this study, all forty recruited participants were interviewed but after analysis, it was apparent that the last two group interviews had not added any further codes and the prior two had added only one further code. I decided therefore that at that stage there would be little to be gained in the form of novel talk used by the participants from further interviews and consequently, the decision was made to stop collecting data and recruiting participants.

### **2.6.1 - Participant Group Demographics and Characteristics**

The consequence of these measures was that a near typical sample of the 18-24 cohort participated in the research (see Office for Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014; National Statistics, 2010; 2012; for comparisons). The average mean age of the participants was 20.5 years. Slightly more female participants than male participants were recruited: 21 participants were female and 19 males. The participant group was 65% White British and 20% British Asian and 10% of the participants described themselves as either Black British or Black African. The final 5% was composed of white ethnic minorities. The participant group therefore slightly over-represented ethnic minorities. 47.5 % of participants were either employed or unemployed and the other 52.5 % were students. Students were slightly overrepresented with 44% of that cohort nationally being

students during the period of the study. One area of possible concern was that the participant group showed a tendency to have lower skilled employment compared to the wider population. This was probably because they were new to the labour market or not that well qualified because of their age (See table 2.2 below).

The participants were notable in two respects. They often presented as on the margins of society. As with the national picture in the UK at the time, a large number of the participants were unemployed and even those that were employed were often in part-time, temporary or relatively poorly paid employment. As a result, conversations used to familiarise myself with the participants were often dominated by issues of lack of money and poor employment in the area. The other striking issue with a large proportion of the participant group was their very poor knowledge of politics. Participants, on occasions, could not remember the name of the current prime minister or the names of the main political parties. As a result, it was quite surprising that any of the participants voted at all and hence they were a particularly interesting group to study.

**Table 2.2 - Participant demographics**

Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Occupation
18	Male	White British	Team Leader
18	Male	White British	Cashier
19	Male	White South African	Cleaner
22	Male	White British	Student
23	Female	White British	Trainee teacher
24	Female	British Asian	Student

23	Female	British Asian	Student
23	Female	British Asian	Student
24	Male	White British	Student
19	Male	Black British	Student
19	Female	White British	Bar assistant
19	Male	White British	Unemployed
20	Male	British Asian	Student
22	Female	White British	Mother
19	Female	British Asian	Unemployed
20	Female	White British	Shop assistant
24	Male	White British	Student
20	Male	White British	Unemployed
21	Male	White British	Catering
21	Female	White British	Optician's assistant
19	Male	Black African	Shop assistant
21	Female	British Asian	Student
21	Male	White British	Student
19	Male	White British	Student
19	Female	White British	Student

20	Female	White British	Student
22	Female	White British	Student
20	Female	White British	Student
19	Male	White British	Student
22	Male	Black British	Bar assistant
20	Female	White British	Swimming Teacher
20	Male	British Asian	Shop assistant
21	Male	British Asian	Student
22	Female	British Polish	Student
19	Female	Black British	Student
18	Female	Black British	Student
20	Female	White British	Shop assistant
21	Female	White British	Care assistant
19	Female	White British	Student
21	Male	White British	Gardener

## 2.7 - Explaining the Data Collection Method

The method of data collection used in this study was semi-structured group interviews.

There are a range of possible data collection techniques that could have been used.

Consequently, it is important to explain why this method was chosen. There are three

elements to this: the decision to use interviews, to interview groups of participants and to use a semi-structured questioning technique. There were twelve group interviews conducted in the course of this study shortly before and in the year after the 2010 general election. Table 2.3 below indicates when the interviews were held, whether the group consisted of voters or non-voters, the number of participants in each interview and identifies the interviewees by the code letters for them used in the interview transcripts.

**Table 2.3 – Details of Interviews**

Date of Interview	Voting or non-voting group	Number of Participants Interviewed	Participant identifier
15 <sup>th</sup> February 2010	Voting	3	A, B, C
17 <sup>th</sup> February 2010	Non-voting	3	D, E, F
8 <sup>th</sup> June 2010	Voting	3	G, H, J
29 <sup>th</sup> September 2010	Voting	3	K, L, M
24 <sup>th</sup> November 2010	Non-voting	3	P, O, N
8 <sup>th</sup> December 2010	Non-voting	3	R, S, T
7 <sup>th</sup> March 2011	Voting	4	W, V, X, Y
13 <sup>th</sup> April 2011	Voting	3	AA, AB, AC
27 <sup>th</sup> April 2011	Non-voting	3	AD, AE, AF
16 <sup>th</sup> May 2011	Non-voting	5	AG, AH, AJ, AK, AL
18 <sup>th</sup> May 2011	Voting	4	AM, AN, AO, AP
25 <sup>th</sup> May 2011	Non-voting	3	AQ, AR, AS



### 2.7.1 - Why Interviews?

The first important question is why choose interviews to conduct data collection. Within qualitative social psychology and the broader field of discourse analysis, there are a number of possible sources of talk and texts that could be regarded as discourse and consequently studied. Talk itself could be in the form interviews or, what might be thought of as, naturally occurring talk: for instance, conversations in a coffee shop. Alternatively, texts such as newspapers, television scripts or advertisements could be used as data. There has been some debate over the most appropriate form of data to study in qualitative social psychology.

In qualitative social psychology research, there was a tendency to rely on interviews as the main source of data. (Potter, 2010). Consequently, interviews are a particular feature of qualitative social constructionist social psychology studies (see for example Billig, 1998; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Widdicombe and Woofit, 1995)

In the last decade, some concerns have been expressed regarding the qualitative interview and its use within the related fields of discourse analysis, conversation analysis and discursive psychology. These critiques of the qualitative interview have been made concurrently with claims of the benefits of using naturally occurring data. The concerns are that:

- qualitative interviews as a data collection tool are usually dominated by the language of and using the concepts of the social sciences because they are managed by the researcher and the researcher asks the questions;
- they can be clouded by the perspectives and agendas of the researcher and the participants; and

- interviewers have an interest in the outcome of the interview and this will affect the interviewees.

(Potter and Hepburn, 2005)

A number of these concerns stem from the influence of conversation analysis on qualitative social psychology and conversation analysis's roots in ethnomethodology. In ethnomethodology, the object of study is the naturally occurring activities that individuals use, as part of their everyday lives, as opposed to any deliberative, rational, designed action that individuals, on occasions, employ (Lynch, 2002). As a result of this, it has been argued that in several key respects naturally occurring data is, in most cases, preferential to interview data (Potter and Hepburn, 2005).

The criticism of the qualitative interviews as a data collection tool is, in part, at least, contested, though (Smith et al, 2005). One important exchange of views has focused on exactly what is constituted by naturally occurring talk. It has been suggested that conversation analysts do not fully consider the role of the researcher in their research epistemology. Consequently, the extent that certain data is more 'natural' than others is overstated. (See; Lynch, 2002; Potter, 2002; Speer, 2002a; Speer, 2002b; Ten Have, 2002 for details of the debate)

Certain conclusions are apparent, though:

- it is difficult to separate the research process from the researcher;
- data collection methods depend crucially on the topic of study;
- the use of interviews as a data collection method should not be taken for granted or undertaken without considerable reflection of the issues involved; and
- the researcher should be conscious of issues such as power relations and style of questions.

As the research topic was 'attitudes to voting', it was decided that this was unlikely to be a matter for everyday conversation. It was, therefore, presumed that it was unlikely that sufficient data could be gained in a naturally occurring setting. Consequently, it was determined that interviews would be the most appropriate method of data collection with certain caveats to attempt to ensure that the data was of a good standard. These were that:

- the researcher would need to take notes over and above transcription to record unspoken events;
- the words of the interviewers, as well as the interviewee, would need to be reported;
- the researcher should be particularly sensitive to power relations within interviews; and
- the researcher should allow the interviewees to take over and tell stories, anecdotes and life experiences connected to the topic and only intervene when necessary.

(Griffin, 2007; Hollway and Jefferson, 2008; Potter and Hepburn, 2005)

### **2.7.2 - Why Group Interviews?**

The interviewees were interviewed in small groups of between three and five people. There is a range of views on ideal group size with some researchers suggesting three people are beneficial and others arguing for groups of up to eight (see Fern, 1982; Kitzinger, 1995; Moreland et al, 2013). The use of group interviews was an important part of enhancing the results of this study and also ameliorating some of the issues with interviews just discussed. The groups were composed of either voters or non-voters:

although there were occasions where individuals had voted in a general election but not voted in subsequent local elections and vice versa.

The interviews that took place were group interviews rather than focus groups. There is a range of methods of interviewing groups (see Frey and Fontana, 1991). The two most important methods are arguably focus groups and the group discussion. Despite their relative importance, they are often confused. The focus group derived originally from market research whilst the use of group discussions as a research tool has its origins in cultural studies and ethnography (Bohnsack, 2004; O'Reilly, 2009)

The aim of the moderator in a focus group is to ensure that the participants answer the questions and there is an effort in the sampling process to recruit participants on a randomised basis. The use of a group discussion, on the other hand, is premised on the idea that the individuals within a group share something in common and, therefore, might represent wider macro-social entities such as a class or a religious group. The participants could, therefore, share common discourses that the group discussion could allow to be recognised. (Bohnsack, 2004)

Whilst the use of the group discussion method presents a number of practical issues and problems it also provides a number of advantages:

- participants can interact with each other and consequently produce data usually found in naturally occurring situations; but
- individual interviewees can disagree and contradict each other and this can make group interviews difficult to facilitate;
- it is an efficient practical method of producing a large body of data;
- participants can be empowered through the group situation as they can ask as well as respond to questions; but also

- participants can be intimidated and pressurised into conforming to the group;
- there is a process of internal self-validation through participants responding to each other's comments; and
- It allows exploration of issues and for the researcher to pick up on nuance and cultural context.

(Arksey and Knight, 1999; Babbie, 2012; Bryman, 2015; Flick, 1998; 2009; Frey and Fontana, 1991; Patton, 1990; Robson, 2002)

The benefits of using group interviews were important because they ensured an appropriate body of evidence consistent with the use of qualitative social constructionist social psychology and allowed for exploration of new solutions to the problem of declining 18-24 attitudes to voting. Some of the disadvantages of the method were problematic, but as social constructionism finds valuable data in contradictions and conflicts within talk, that people could disagree and argue points could be regarded as a benefit as well as a problem with the research.

### **2.7.3 - The Choice of Questioning Style**

A variety of questioning approaches can be used in social science research and the choice of questioning approach can have an effect on the quality and type of data produced. The structured interview is a common method of administering a survey and values consistency in delivery and participant response. This is a technique often used in political science but is ineffective at exploring participant's psychology as participants only respond to specific questions and inappropriate with social constructionist research as no effort is made to tease out the range of perspectives on issues that participants may have. A further type of questioning style commonly used is the unstructured interview. This type of interview has similarities to a conversation. This can be exploratory but often

also leads to large quantities of data unrelated to the research questions. A third type is the semi-structured interview. A semi-structured questioning technique consists of the interviewer asking a series of questions but subsequently, in response, allowing the participant to lead the conversation where they wish. It ensures that certain topics are discussed but participants are free to say what they want (Babbie, 2012; Bryman, 2015; Flick, 1998; 2009; Patton, 1990; Silvermann, 2005; 2009).

The interviews in this study were conducted using a semi-structured method. This method shares a number of advantages with unstructured interviews but with fewer drawbacks. This method of data collection was chosen for four reasons:

- first, this method gives the advantage of being able to use follow on questions within the interview ensuring that areas of interest can be fully explored;
- second, this method has advantages in terms of mirroring real life over data collection methods such as surveys and structured interviews: the process of conducting a semi-structured interview has some similarities with ordinary conversation and consequently the process of data collection is likely to produce a better quality of data than more structured methods. This is partly because when it is used in a group interview setting it allows the possibility of participant to participant talk;
- third, semi-structured interviews are useful when trying to discover social meaning as they allow participants a certain amount of control over the interview process (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; McNeill and Chapman, 2005; Wengraf, 2001). Participants can lead the conversation in unexpected ways and can give their own explanations for issues that may differ considerably from what was envisaged by the researcher, but the interviewer has the opportunity to return to

a topic guide at any point. For this reason, semi-structured interviews are preferred to other forms of interviewing as a method of data collection within qualitative social psychology (Billig, 1998); and

- fourth, it is a relatively cost effective, practical and straightforward method of data collection and therefore consequently more likely to be issue free than more complex methods (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Widdicombe and Woofit, 1995).

#### **2.7.4 - Testing the Interview Process**

It was decided to conduct pilot interviews (Bryman, 2015; Blaxter et al, 2010, Robson, 2002; Silvermann, 2005; 2009). The reasons for this were:

- to test and evaluate the topic guide;
- to consider the effect of venue and setting;
- to evaluate the effectiveness of sound recording equipment;
- to consider how to build rapport during the interview process; and
- to prevent unforeseen issues hindering data collection.

Two groups of volunteer students, from courses that I teach on, were asked to participate in the pilot interviews. The pilot interviews were conducted in 2009 in anticipation of an election, and a consequent window to conduct research in, the following year. For ethical reasons, no data was transcribed and interview recordings were destroyed shortly after the pilot interviews. The reason for using my own students in the pilot interviews was that they had participated in a number of minor research projects and as a consequence of this they were experienced in conducting evaluations. Furthermore, there were two reasons that ran counter to them acting as research participants. First, there would have been issues of power and ethics, which would have overshadowed any results. Second,

because they had some grounding in political theory, their talk was likely to be compromised in that they would be much more aware than other members of society of the political theories underlying attitudes to voting.

The results of this process had a direct impact on the data collection process. Two pilot interviews were conducted separately: a short period apart. The first interview was evaluated by the participants and then improvements to the interview process were made. These were then again evaluated after the second interview to check that the improvements made had worked.

The first pilot interview was held in a student social room which, was chosen because it was comfortable and would put the participants at ease. However, it was liable to have some interruptions and suffer from some external noise. The first group of interviewees consisted of four students. The interviewees liked the informality of the setting and although, as a consequence of the setting, there was difficulty hearing them on the tape recording this seemed manageable. They appeared to respond well to the first few questions and many of the questions in the topic guide were not vocalised rather it was noted that they had been answered. The interviewer's role in much of the interview was simply to acknowledge their conversation and ask for clarification of particular points that they had made. This was aided by using questions such as "Can you run through that, bit by bit?", "Can you explain how you would do that?" and "How does that work?" borrowed from ethnographic research techniques (Spradley, 1979). The interviewees suggested that more time was required for participants to relax before the interviews proper began as the process of recording their voices caused them some anxiety.

The second pilot interview was held in an interview room. This was a more formal, but quieter, setting than the social room that had been used in the first pilot interview. There



were three interviewees, on this occasion, and further time was allowed for them to relax before the interview started. There was still some difficulty, on occasions, in hearing the participants and it became clear that interviewees will not always speak clearly irrespective of the setting. Consequently, it was decided that it would be necessary to allow extra time for transcribing recordings. The second interview was not as relaxed as the first and with the assistance of the participants, it became clear that this was due to the more formal venue. As a consequence of this, it was decided to use more social settings and simply persevere on finding appropriate times when data collection could happen with the minimum of disruption.

## **2.8 - Deriving and Refining Codes and Themes**

### **2.8.1 - Transcribing and Coding**

Transcribing and coding is the process of taking raw data and determining what is important and what is not. Therefore, it is crucial to understanding how the results of this study were arrived at. The study produced a considerable body of raw data and this was wholly transcribed by me and hence, points of interest within the data were noted prior to formal coding (Bird, 2005; Lapadat and Lindsay, 1999). To transcribe the data a truncated version of the well-known Jefferson notation system was used (Jefferson, 1983; Wetherell and Potter, 1992). The notation was used to show where participants had paused in their speech, how long they had paused for and also to show where there was a significant emphasis on parts of speech. The reason for using only part of the notation was that this was sufficient for the type of the analysis that was planned (Wetherell and Potter, 1987). This is a contested point within qualitative social psychology with some writers arguing that a detailed transcription is always necessary and others suggesting

that the level of transcription should be determined by the type of analysis used (See Griffin, 2007; Potter and Hepburn, 2005; Smith et al, 2005 for details).

The initial stages of coding involved making notes on the margins of transcripts indicating the initial thoughts regarding coding. Within qualitative social constructionist social psychology, coding is initially carried out exhaustively such that, each piece of text can be coded to several different codes. This is aimed at ensuring that coding focuses on considering all possibilities rather than limiting them. This is an important process within social constructionist thematised analysis and it distinguishes it from other qualitative methods (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The aim was to attempt to develop codes, analytic ideas and themes that fully represented the talk of the participants. I was aware though that this was not a wholly realistic process. I was familiar with the literature on the subjects that were participants were discussing. I felt that this would inevitably colour my efforts at coding. The coding process there had to be particularly reflective and was also undertaken in conjunction with others: my coding was checked by third parties. I asked my research supervisors to do this for me. This was not ideal as they also were very conscious of what the subjects' issues involved but having other perspectives on the process should also have improved it.

### **2.8.2 - Data Analysis**

The coding was then transferred to a Nvivo software package and using this, the process of naming and defining codes began. This was the start of the process of identifying themes in the participant's talk. The process throughout was iterative and conducted with feedback from other people. It was difficult to capture the whole of the idea of the code in a name and consequently naming the codes was revisited several times. Once the codes were given names that I and my supervisors felt captured the majority of the

essence of what the participants had said. I then started looking for themes within the codes. This was initially a matter of looking at all codes and trying to determine what the links between each of them were. I tried initially to do this exhaustively determining as many links as possible between different codes as possible. This was conducted using mind mapping techniques. Care needed to be taken to ensure that the links were not just repetition of the same ideas rephrased and significant effort was required to make the map legible and graspable.

Having reached this stage, it became apparent that some ideas regarding themes and sub-themes were beginning to emerge but it was clear that the body of mind mapping was too complex to work with and develop themes from. So I decided to abstract the themes from the mind map. Drawing on the work of Braun and Clarke (2006), a theme was a pattern of linked ideas that with other themes explained the data set that I was working with. These were made up of codes. Within the themes, there were certain linked ideas and codes that helped to shape the themes. These were sub-themes. These were analytic ideas that were less than themes but expressed an important part of the theme. Naturally, there were some difficult decisions regarding what was part of a theme and what was not. The themes developed over a period of several months and there was an important element of interplay between them. There was also quite extensive work where themes had codes added and removed, where new themes were identified or alternatively where themes, sub-themes or codes were simply abandoned as bad ideas. This was a process of making sure that the themes worked internally; that all the codes worked together as part of the theme and that the themes were distinct. What I wanted to achieve was a framework of themes that adequately explained my body of data: the talk of the participants

Having got to this point, I then began to name the themes. Each theme was a composite map of codes and sub-themes under an overarching theme. Each theme had been given a working title but it was an important part of the analysis to name each code such that it would explain to a reader what that theme meant; it would adequately summarise that code. The final stage of the research process was to consider what the themes meant in relation to the research questions. This is usually a process of thinking about the broader societal impacts of the themes in the talk of the participants. As a consequence of the notion of intersubjectivity and the ideas within social constructionism, I presume that themes will have meaning in wider society outside of the study and will also shape the behaviour of individuals. In this study though it was also important to consider how using the methodology had provided different information and outcomes from the methodologies commonly used in political science

## **2.9 – Methodological Reflections**

This chapter of the thesis has explained how the research was conducted. In doing so, a number of important points were illuminated. A number of ideas were considered from the first chapter and it was explained how they might impact on later chapters in the thesis. The initial explanation of qualitative social constructionist social psychology from chapter one was expanded. The thesis has now explored:

- the history and complexity of qualitative social constructionist social psychology;
- how qualitative social psychology relates to social constructionism and thematic analysis and:
- the practical aspects of how the research was conducted

These will now be employed in the subsequent chapter where the results of the pilot will be discussed.

There were a number of methodological tensions and influences in the study that it is important to explore before moving on to the results as they are part of the subjective nature of the results and conclusions that I draw. One obvious area to reflect on was my personal involvements. I have already mentioned in my explanation of why I conducted this thesis that I had started with a strong interest in political science both as a teacher and as someone whose family was involved in local politics. It was reasonable to assume that I was bringing in various perspectives of my own into the coding process. I was a parent and was concerned about the future lives of my children and lived a fairly conformist life. I thought because of this that I was more likely to see certain responses or ideas in the codes than others. I also felt that because this thesis was for a Ph.D., I would be very eager to find something and in effect there was a danger that I would force the coding and perhaps see things that just were not there.

The second area of tension involved the practical application of social constructionism to explore a political science question. In chapter one I had explored possibilities of overlap between social constructionism and political science; considering approaches that had managed to adopt social constructionist methods that could be or are being used in political science. Whilst doing this I became aware of the obvious tensions in approach between the multi-perspectives of social constructionism and the single understanding of realism. As I was devising the methodology for this study further issues and tensions arose. I was aware that, for instance, that I was using a large number of participants to make my study more acceptable to political scientists but that this could, in turn, crowd my data and make it more difficult to see what was going on. I was also aware that many

of the questions that I was using were framed and formed in a realist perspective and that this might again colour my results and conclusions.

Finally, I was becoming increasingly aware of the tensions between political science and psychology. In essence, this was a multi-layered issue. There was a tension between the macro-sociological world of mainstream political science and the microcosm of individual psychology although this, to a great degree, had already been resolved in sub-fields such as social psychology and political behaviour. However, it was also clear that there were topic and language differences between political science and psychology that were a result of different histories and cultures and that these might need a careful explanation as they arose.

# Chapter Three

## The Themes Deployed by Participants

### 3.1 - Introduction

Eight broad explanations of the declining propensity to vote in the 18-24 cohort were discussed in chapter one. These focused on a complex set of ideas, such as party identification and political trust with inherent psychological facets that, consequently, could account for individual attitudes towards voting. As major academic explanations of propensity to vote, it was presumed that the behaviour and attitudes of participants in this study would be shaped by these explanations in the form of talk regarding them. These explanations were formulated into a series of questions, a topic guide, in chapter two. This was then used to steer group interviews which were the data collection instrument of this study.

The corpus of data, the talk of the participants, was then coded and analysed from the transcripts of the group discussions that ensued from these questions. This process was composed of a number of overlapping processes. There was a degree of iterative work where coding and analysis fed in and guided later interviews. I coded all the transcripts myself. There were a number of reasons for this but the most important were that through having to listen to and carefully type up the overlapping talk of the participants I became very familiar with the interview transcripts. This allowed ideas about initial patterns and thoughts about the underlying meaning of what the participants were saying to emerge and before any formal attempt at coding began and was an important first part of the analysis (Bird, 2005; Lapadat and Lindsay, 1999).

The next step was initial coding. Coding is a particularly iterative element of the process of thematic analysis. Coding is usually the search for commonality in the data but in social constructionism this tends to focus on meanings and ideas: there is an interpretive element to the coding process. Consequently, there were often occasions where as new thoughts and ideas regarding the coding came to me I would have to go back and review earlier coding (Braun and Clarke, 2006). During interview eleven, for instance, it became apparent that some of the participants' talk was related to party identification and was coded as such. As a consequence of this, it was then important to review previously coded transcripts and consider whether any of the talk could also fit into to this code as well as considering the possibility in the last transcript and seven further occurrences were identified.

Having identified initial coding within the transcripts, the process of identifying themes began. Initially, this involved sorting the codes that seemed to be related together and thinking about the relationship between them. This process was then further refined by attempting to closely consider the boundaries and definition of themes: their internal coherence and the fit of each of their constituent codes. This involved some further work with the codes as this reconsideration often caused distinctions within codes to appear or the realisation that one code was closely linked to another and a sub-theme to appear. The next stage involved considering whether the full meaning behind the transcripts was covered by the totality of the themes described (ibid).

Having done this, the final stages revolved around explaining what the themes explained about propensity to vote both as individual themes and as a whole. This was essentially telling the story of the data and in this part of the analysis, the aim was to go further and consider the wider implications of what had been identified. Consequently, this part of



the analysis will extend to the next chapter of the thesis where the possible implications of this work for political science explanations of voting behaviour will be considered.

### **3.2 –Key points, Themes, and Consequent Structure of the Chapter**

There are four relevant points regarding coding and thematic analysis that need to be discussed before considering the themes that this study identified. First, within qualitative social psychology and wider linguistic fields there is the presumption, derived from the work of Austin, Searle and Wittgenstein, that language is purposeful: that it is action orientated and that we are doing something with language, particularly in terms of our psychology, and the meanings that we associate with actions (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). This suggests that the talk used by an individual regarding particular ideas, such as political trust, will, alongside other relevant societal discourses shape that individual's attitude and consequent behaviour towards voting.

Second, talk is variable because it can also be considered as a range of linguistic resources that can be used by individuals selectively, according to the social context (ibid). This results in variation both within and between codes and themes and a consequent need for careful consideration of the data in order to reasonably identify them. This has consequences. It calls for a different approach to interviewing in order to discover the variations in talk (Wetherell and Potter, 1992).

Third, as just alluded to, social constructionist psychology uses a particular probing and challenging questioning style. The purpose of this questioning approach is to discover variation in participants' accounts (Wetherell and Potter, 1992). This inevitably could lead to concerns about an interviewer effect. This is a concern, found in a number of methodological approaches, that participant responses are, to an extent, created or influenced by the interviewer (Hyman et al, 1975). There have been a number of attempts

to deal with this issue: within survey methodology part of the interviewing protocols has been for the interviewer to attempt to be wholly consistent in their approach to the interview (Oppenheim, 1992). The approach often used is to standardise the interaction of the interviewer and the participant through the creation of a schedule dictating exactly what the interviewer does (Fowler and Mangione, 1990). The aim is to subject the interviewee to identical stimuli. However, this approach is also problematic as this creates rigidity within the interview process that itself can cause bias (Briggs, 1986; Mishler, 1991, Suchman and Jordan, 1990).

Within social constructionism, the approach is epistemologically and practically different. The presumption made is that, whatever care taken, the researcher and the research instruments will always have some effect on the participant responses (Hollway, 1989). Not only do these effects need to be taken into account in the consequent analysis; they are an important part of the analysis (Potter, 2010). If the idea that a standardised approach is possible, is discarded or at least considered problematic and unlikely to be in reality achieved, the importance of accepting, working and studying the subjectivity of the research situation is apparent; the aim of the research becomes to study the variety of subjective positions rather than an illusion of objective reality (Parker, 2004). The approach taken is to consider that the interviews are not based on a fixed reality rather that they, as with many other research methods, construct a subjective account of events that are valuable research material in themselves (Holstein and Gubrium, 1975; 1997; Buckholdt and Gubrium, 1979). These accounts constitute the intersubjective meaning between the participant and the interviewer and are the source of themes and underlying codes.

Finally, I will also refer to the prevalence of each constituent code as I describe the themes. This is a matter of some controversy in qualitative work (See Braun and Clarke, 2006). This is because it is arguable whether the number of instance of a code appearing has any bearing on its relevance to subsequent analysis. This is particularly true if you consider that the length and content of instances of codes vary and, therefore, one instance of a code may be represented by a few words whilst another may be a page or two of the script. The purpose, therefore, of stating the prevalence of instances of a particular code is simply a broad indication of the amount of evidence for it in the body of data considered. Social constructionist research depends for quality on other measures. First, because the researcher is an intertwined part the research process and consequently cannot produce an objective piece research, it is important that the position of the researcher is reflected and reported on. Second, because discursive themes are not simply produced within the research context but are rather part of the fabric of society and should consequently be recognised by the researcher: recognition is an important element in developing quality qualitative research. Therefore, a code may have few instances but through a process of recognition and reflection be regarded as part of a quality piece of research. Third, quality is usually confirmed in social constructionist research through peer and member checking. This is not a process of validation as with similar quality processes occurring in realist work because the researcher is part of the research process and there are a variety of perspectives that may appear in social constructionist research. Rather, it is to guard the danger of findings being asynchronous and anomalous. Consequently, others should be able to recognise your findings too (Parker, 2004). Therefore, the reason for stating the prevalence of a code is limited to suggesting that there is some evidence for it in the body of work and making a claim that your participants have used it, but in the numerical and scaling sense

it is broadly a matter of convention. We use the number of occurrences because it is a matter of exactness in academia. Where a participant uses a particular code on more than one occasion, in this work, the actual number of participants that used the code is indicated afterwards in the text

In this study, four main themes were identified. These were:

- distrust;
- disengagement;
- political involvement; and
- moral voting.

The first two themes appeared to be broadly encouraging participants to abstain from voting whilst the latter two tended to encourage voting. This chapter first explains each theme in turn: its structure, the codes that constitute it and what each theme means and how it appears to shape behaviour in the participant group. The broader implications of the analysis as a whole will be discussed, as already said, in the next chapter.

In the examples shown, participants are labelled alphabetically using letters from A through to Y and then AA to AS, the letter I was reserved for the interviewer. The examples show a longer passage of talk than would be necessary simply to show the code. This is to enable the reader to see the context in which the code is used (Bryman, 2015). The examples use a truncated version of the Jefferson (2004) notation system (.) indicates a just noticeable pause speech, longer pauses are shown by the length of the break in seconds shown in the brackets. Where the names of themes, sub-themes and codes appear in the text of thesis they will be italicised to aid reading. Examples of codes where chosen on the basis that they were good representations of the code and that as large a part of the participant body as possible could be demonstrated to be contributing

to the conclusions. This compromise inevitably led to some issues regarding the quality of a few of the examples used in the thesis

### 3.3 - The Distrust Theme

The first theme that I will discuss was called *Distrust*. This was made up of a number of interconnected sub-themes and codes. The first extract that will explain this theme is a relatively long extract that was coded to a variety of different codes and I will use it to map out some of the boundaries of the theme and outline some of the sub-themes and codes within it before a more detailed treatment of each of the codes and the way in which they contribute to the central theme is undertaken. The extract is from interview 5 and features two participants O and N. A third participant was present but did not speak.

#### Extract 1, Transcript 5

- 220 P I'd like to write a letter to like my MP (.) or the prime  
221 minister  
222 I But  
223 P The fact that they'll not pay attention to anything it says  
224 I Right (.) Ok (.) so you just don't believe that they would  
225 P No (.) I don't (.) I believe that they might read but after  
226 reading it for so long and they realised (.) well what's  
227 the point in reading this (.) they're not going to do  
228 nothing about it  
229 I Oh Ok (.) so you think they'll just ignore it (.) because it's  
230 you  
231 P No (.) not just because it's me  
232 I No (.) no (.)but somebody like you

233 P Yeah

234 I Right (.) so who do they actually listen to

235 P Rich people

236 I Rich people (.) Ok

237 P Or people with like

238 O Contacts

239 I Sorry

240 O People with contacts

241 P People who know people

242 I Contacts Ok (.) so some kind of elite (.) Ok (.) right umm

243 P Upper class (.) not middle or lower

244 I You agree on that

245 N Yeah I do cos (.) umm (.) politicians uhh (.) yeah if (.)

246 they don't like (.) mostly listen to the locals (.) or they

247 listen but they don't actually act on it

248 I Go on

249 N You know like (.) they say umm (.) for instance someone

250 would say that when I come there will be less poverty in

251 the street or something (.) and then they come and then

252 they still sees (.) what we see daily (.) and like when we

253 say something about it (.) they just ignore it

254 I Right

255 N Unless you're a like a person (.) with like public

256 appearances with umm (.) like fame or (.) like most

257 people know you

258 I Yeah

259 N Then that's when they like (.) actually listen (.) to what

260 you have said

261 P It's like they're (.) they're professionals at making

262 promises but (.) not very good at keeping them

263 I That's an interesting idea (.) yeah umm (.) right so is

264 that all politicians

265 P Yeah

266 I Right (.) OK (.) across the board

267 P I've never met (.) an honest politician

268 O It's just this act (.) that guy called that old women bigot

269 (.) and he had to go and sit and have a cup of tea with

270 her and talk to her (.) he was forced to (.) and it was just

271 like so fake and they put it like (.) on TV and it was just

272 like (.) all these just being front on to be polite and nice

273 (.) and be like oh (.) he apologised on national TV

274 I Right

275 O So it's all a bit of a show

276 I Right (.) just for the camera

277 O Yeah he wouldn't normally (.) he made sure that

278 everybody knew he went and had tea with this local

279 lady (.) and listened to her

280 N Yeah (.) just this waste of time

281 O He didn't say anything about calling her names behind

282 her back

283 P Yeah (.) but to them (.) it's just getting their self in the  
 284 public eye  
 285 O Yeah  
 286 I Right (.) Ok  
 287 O They'll come across as nice (.) but it's all an act (.) like  
 288 they want (.) they'll just portray it  
 289 P They do what they have to do to get (.) more candidates

Figure 3.1 – Mapping the Distrust Theme

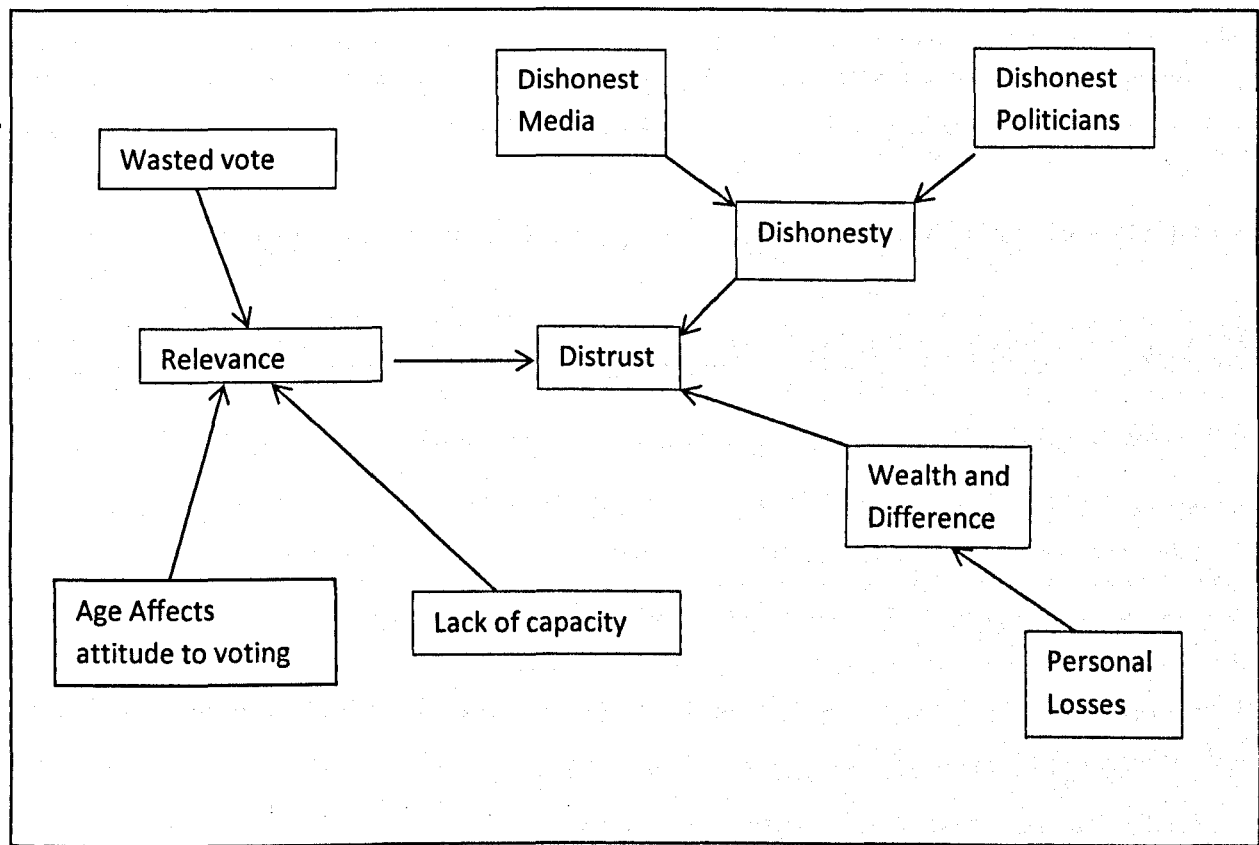


Figure 3.1 gives a visual illustration of how the theme fits together and the connections between the codes and sub-themes. The starting point of this extract is participant P explaining that he would like to write to his MP or the Prime Minister. I pick up on the word like. The participant says that there is a reason why this act would not be of benefit. The participant explains that he thinks it would be read but ignored (lines 220-227). This was an element of this theme referred to as *Relevance* and it consisted of two codes that,



as with all the points I make here, I will go on to explain and illustrate further shortly. At line 229 I start to explore this asking why this would be the case. The participants explain that the people politicians listen to are rich (line 235), upper-class people (line 243), that are public figures (lines 255-256). Participant P then suggests that local people are ignored because they are poor and not well connected (lines 245-253). This set of ideas focusing on privileged groups of people in society having access to politicians and influence whilst the ordinary poor did not was coded as *Wealth and difference*. The lines from 249-253 also contributed to a code called *Personal losses* where participants highlighted the financial losses they had suffered because of politicians or political decisions. Between lines 238 and 241, a further connected code occurs. The participants discuss a shadowy network underlying those that have power. The phrase used is 'people who know people'. This again contributed to the *Relevance* code. The participants then go on to explain that politicians also lie and are dishonest (lines 261-267). This is more problematic because politicians are breaking promises and this is not isolated rather it is all politicians. This contributed to the code *Dishonesty*. The main participant P then discusses an incident in the 2010 election often referred to as bigotgate and this highlights a further code where the role referred to as *Dishonest media* which suggest that the media are part of the perceived deceit of politicians (lines 268-289).

### **3.3.1 - The Sub-theme Relevance**

Having given an overview of the principal theme, it is important to explain how the individual codes are constituted and fit into it. This will be achieved by first considering the sub-theme *Relevance* and then explaining the other sub-themes in turn before discussing how they fit together. The sub-theme *Relevance* was a code in itself but was also linked to three other codes *Wasted vote*, *Age affects attitude to voting* and *Lack of*

*capacity* that I will explain using the three extracts from interview 3 below. The section will illustrate how the codes explain and link together to form the sub-theme. Two participants G and H feature in the transcripts, a third participant was present but did not say anything in these parts of the interview.

#### Extract 2, Transcript 3.

- 176 G I don't feel that it affects me at all (.) I'm just (.) I come  
177 (.) they might do stuff to colleges and stuff (.) like that (.)  
178 universities (.) I'm in college (.) I do my work (.) I go  
179 home (.) I sleep (.) I eat (.) I drink (.) I go to work (.) it  
180 doesn't affect my life at all
- 181 I Right (.) Ok
- 182 G Until I see a bump in the road that it affects my life  
183 (.) I'm not gonna bother with it am I
- 184 I Right (.) and let's say for instance
- 185 G And plus (.) I'm younger so (.) it's not really gonna affect  
186 me that much (.) whereas if someone older they (.) they  
187 probably realise the effects

The first transcript starts with participant G explaining that his life is not, in his view, really affected by government policies. He suggests that the government may do things that affect things in his life but it has no impact on what he does (lines 176-180). He then uses a metaphor to suggest that unless there is an issue that affects him he was not going to attend to politics. This section contributed to the main code Relevance as the participant was saying that government does not attend to issues of importance to him. This main code was used in 16 instances by voters and 19 instances

by non-voters. The participant then goes on to explain that an element of this was to do with his age (lines 185-187). He suggests that if he was older then he might see that government policy was affecting him. This was coded to *Age affects attitudes to voting*. The code had a striking similarity the view expressed in the literature that a lifecycle can affect voting behaviour (Goerres, 2006; Jennings, 1979; Stoker and Jennings 1995). This was one important way in which the sub-theme of Relevance was framed. The code *Age affects attitudes to voting* was used three times once by a participant claiming to be a voter and twice by non-voting participants.

### Extract 3, Transcript 3

- 223 G No I don't mean like that sort of thing (.) it was like  
224 theoretically  
225 I Go on (.) give me an example  
226 G Like (.) like taxes an stuff (.) like that  
227 I Right so  
228 G That's what I'm saying (.) like (.)when you're older  
229 you're gonna notice that bump (.) while when you're  
230 younger (.) you're not really gonna sorta notice it  
231 because (.) you're doing other things an stuff  
232 I Right OK (.) so you know the government comes in and  
233 it's going to do this that and the other (.) and it makes  
234 promises (.) doesn't it  
235 G yeah  
236 I Do you believe them  
237 G No

238 I Why

239 G They might have the power to do it (.) I don't ever see

240 things being changed

241 I Go on (.) tell me about that

242 G That's what I'm trying to say (.) I don't really (.) the

243 effects what they do (.) it doesn't really affect me (.) so I

244 can't see the changes (.) which is why I don't bother

245 voting

The next extract features the same participant slightly later in the interview. This extract starts with the participant again using the metaphor of a bump in the road as a reason to vote and that this is only something that you become aware of if you are older (Lines 223-230). This again contributed to the code *Age affects attitude to voting*. I, the interviewer, change tack at this point and ask another exploratory question broadly aimed at exploring trust in government (lines 232-236). The participant G then returns to the sub-theme code of Relevance (lines 236-240). At this point, the participant introduces a new idea; that they were not going to vote because politics does not affect them and that this is why they do not vote from lines 242 to 245: although bizarrely, the participant claims to have voted at the last general elections he did not vote at locals and sees himself as a non-voter. This contributed to the code *Wasted vote* in which participants suggested that their vote was not beneficial to them because there was no consequence to it. It is important to note at this point that a further reason for the code *Wasted vote* was because the participants saw the seat as safe and the result foregone conclusions but this was still connected to the sub-theme of *Relevance*. The latter reason resonated with some of the literature explaining

changes in voting behaviour (Anderson, 2005). The code was used on six occasions and only by voting participants.

#### Extract 4, Transcript 3

428 G That's the only thing that I've got in the back of my mind  
429 (.) you can't say that you will follow them (.) you will  
430 back them for things they do (.) until you see the  
431 changes

432 I Right (.) so if you see the evidence

433 G If you physically notice the changes

434 I Right

435 H I haven't noticed any difference (.) since they've been in  
436 parliament

437 I Right

438 H All they've said is oh (.) this (.) this we might change this  
439 (.) and we need to see the government going down here  
440 (.) there's been what six weeks did you say

441 I Yeah (.) something like that (.) it's a couple of weeks

442 H I haven't noticed a thing (.) that's what I'm saying

443 G How long has David Cameron been in there

444 I Maybe it's not six weeks (.) maybe it's about three or  
445 four but

446 G Nothing (.) I can't see any changes

447 H But still (.) how long does it take (.) to really settle in

448 I Yeah

449 H Is it going to take him three (.) four months(.) five  
 450 months  
 451 G My fags (.) my alcohol (.) my college fees whatever else I  
 452 have to pay (.) buses it's the same price (.) or they go  
 453 higher (.) they never go lower (.) so it's not helping me  
 454 whatever they do (.) it's not helping me at the end of  
 455 the day

The final extract in this section features a further participant from the same interview, participant H, as well as participant G. The extract starts with participant G repeating the idea that he needs to see something changing to vote (lines 428- 433). This contributed to the main sub-theme code *Relevance*. At this point, the second participant joins in suggesting that they had not seen what government has achieved either. The interview is at the start of the coalition government's tenure and the participants start asking how long it should take for the government to do something. Then at line 451 to 455, the second participant brings in the last contributory code: that government has a *Lack of capacity* to change anything. In this case, the participants are talking about economic costs: bus fares and cigarette prices but the code has featured issues such as crime and global commodities, such as oil prices, but always highlighting that government has a *Lack of capacity* to deal with these issues. The code was used in two instances by voters and on 10 instances by non-voters.

Each of the codes has been shown linked to the central code and each other. The codes individually are facets of explanation and justification that shape the way that individual behave in relation to elections and politics. The first code *Age affects attitude to voting*, suggests that the young people involved in the interviews are not affected by politics and government: their lives are separate from government and consequently the actions of

government. The second code, *Wasted vote*, simply suggests that the act of voting was not of benefit because either the consequent government were not seen to be doing anything or the vote was in a safe seat and didn't affect the outcome. This was particularly the case if the voter wanted a different outcome. Either way, the key point was that it was a *Wasted vote*. Finally, the last code focused on a *Lack of capacity* to change and simply suggested that government was not able to affect many of the issues affecting the country and this was the reason for a lack of change. Each of the codes then contributed to the central code *Relevance* suggesting that the participants could not affect the change they wanted through the political system.

### 3.3.2 - The Sub -theme Dishonesty

The second sub-theme was called *Dishonesty* and the central code of this theme focused on politician's integrity a second linked code similarly focused on integrity but this time, it was the integrity of the media. The two codes are demonstrated in the extract below from interview 6 featuring participants S and T.

#### Extract 5, Transcript 6

- 398     S     We do complain (.) people say government are this (.)  
399             government are that (.) they're useless (.) and then it  
400             just gets them a bad reputation (.) they're never in the  
401             past ten years where inflation's been going up and that  
402             (.) people have complete (.) have been complaining  
403             about government not delivering properly (.) when it's  
404             just made their reputation go down  
405     I     Right  
406     S     That's probably where the like trust issues are coming  
407             from

408 I You reckon

409 T Umm (.) I think the best (.) I thought was the most

410 funniest when I was watching transformers (.) is (.) how

411 she at the very end (.) she said (.) but the government

412 don't lie to us (.) and it was how (.) it was in the cinema

413 and everyone laughed

414 I Right

415 T Because everyone knows (.) the government do lie

416 I Right

417 T And (.) especially in the media

418 I Right

419 T How they (.) they put certain like (.) they get certain

420 information (.) put it up on (.) on in the news or

421 anything (.) but could easily be misinterpreted

422 I Right

423 T But its (.) it makes you think (.) why should I trust the

424 government

425 I Right is it (.) now you mentioned something there (.)

426 and I just (.) yeah obviously everything you know about

427 government comes through the media (.) in some form

428 or another (.) you get it through the radio (.) the

429 internet (.) the papers (.) TV (.) is it (.) the government

430 you don't trust (.) or the media

431 T I think that both (.) I mean (.) I mean you can't exactly

432 go (.) it's not like I can go up to umm (.) I think it's Tony



433 Blair (.) umm (.) and just ask him (.) what (.) so you can  
 434 change things (.) and just give him a question (.) cos it's  
 435 not that easy (.) just to do that (.) can't email him (.)  
 436 because you'd have to go through a whole system (.) so  
 437 all you're getting all your information from (.) is just the  
 438 media  
 439 I Right  
 440 T But then in a way you still can't trust the media (.)  
 441 including everyone else (.) including everyone (.)  
 442 everyone in the  
 443 S Governments say stuff (.) the media will publish it (.) but  
 444 (.) for all you know the media can be exaggerating (.)  
 445 different aspects of what the person has just said  
 446 I Right  
 447 S They can take things out of context (.) and make it seem  
 448 a way (.) like a different way to what the person meant

The extract starts participant S explaining that government having a poor reputation (line 398 - 404) and that part of the reason for that was that people were not getting what they wanted (lines 402-403). This was prompted by me asking the participants about something they had previously said; that people do not like government. This part of the transcript was initially linked to the code *Relevance* discussed in the prior section. Then, the participant changes emphasis. At line 406, the participant introduces the idea of trust in government. Participant T joins in, at this point, and using an example from the film *Transformers* to illustrate the point that government lie. This was coded to the *Dishonest politicians* code. The code was a grouping of text that suggested that government and

politicians were not telling the truth or were hiding the truth in some way. This was used in 14 instances by voters and 30 instances by non-voters (16 participants in total). The code continued through the extract but again there is a change of tack at line 417. Here the participant explains that politicians use the media to lie to the people. After a further exploratory question by me, the participant then explains that, for the most part, it is only through the media that we interact with politicians. Then at lines 431 to 438, the participant T explains that you cannot trust the media either and then from lines 443 to 445 participant S explains agrees and adds to what participant S has said by suggesting how the media are not trustworthy because they exaggerate and take things out of context. This was coded to the second code in the sub-theme *Dishonesty, Dishonest media*. This code was used 13 times by voters and 27 times by non-voters (19 participants in total). This code again suggested that the participants felt that they could not trust what the media were saying with regard to politics. The connection between the codes and the consequent sub-theme *Dishonesty* is that the participants felt that both politicians and the media were lying. The important addition that the sub-theme makes is that the participants found it difficult to know whether they felt it was the politicians or the media that were lying. The consequence of this is that the sub-theme represents an extra layer of complexity as is apparent as in lines 431-438.

### **3.3.3 – The Sub-theme Wealth and Difference**

The third sub-theme was referred to as *Wealth and difference*. This sub-theme was composed of two codes, the main code *Wealth and difference* and a contributory code referred to as *Personal losses*. The sub-theme is illustrated by the extract overleaf featuring three participants A, B and C.

- 700 A Well just generally in politics umm (.) its (.) it's suffering  
701 a bit I think (.) because of the whole MPs scandals and  
702 C Oh they deserve that  
703 B There's always been scandals though hasn't (.) that's  
704 not a new thing  
705 A That's the thing yes (.) it's not a new thing (.) I know  
706 because obviously the whole expenses thing got blown  
707 out and you know  
708 C No it wasn't blown out  
709 A No (.) but you found out I don't know umm (.) an MP  
710 down the road claimed fifteen grand for (.) I don't know  
711 washing his car (.) or something really stupid like that  
712 B Duck Island  
713 A And you just think to yourself  
714 B Or a chicken hut  
715 A You know (.) what on earth  
716 C Cos they've lost contact because as part of being an MP  
717 you (.) one you're spending our money and two (.) they  
718 ought (.) this is the thing (.) they can vilify once the  
719 monarchy and their expenditure and they didn't view  
720 their own (.) which was ok (.) we understand you have  
721 to look at the queens expenditure because it our money  
722 going into (.) but the same principle applies to you (.)  
723 and they avoided that for years and then they did this (.)

724 and then you find out the stupid things like the bloody  
 725 duck Island

726 B Some of them (.) can have like millions in their family  
 727 like they're in a five million house an they're still putting  
 728 twenty grand on expenses (.) like on a chimney pot

729 C And why does it not make moral sense (.) if you have  
 730 money already and you know you're spending (.) there  
 731 should be a moral sense (.) when you're a politician I  
 732 mean they (.) when they do things umm (.) not the deaf  
 733 vote ohh god (.) it was umm (.) when they umm (.) I  
 734 forgot the term now (.) it was very sad but when they  
 735 tried (.) when they try punishing prisoners by their umm  
 736 (.) they have a conscience vote in parliament they don't  
 737 represent our view (.) they have a conscience vote (.) so  
 738 if they have things like that (.) they should be having  
 739 their own conscience for this as well (.) for spending our  
 740 money

741 B Guess it's umm (.) temptation

742 C I don't care if they're human (.) they're not allowed

743 A With that (.) the whole expenses thing (.) it kind of (.)  
 744 MP's lost touch with the public (.) and it no longer  
 745 became you know (.) we are you (.) we represent you (.)  
 746 it's us and them kinda thing (.) and also I think Labour's  
 747 accused (.) the conservatives at the moment (.) of a kind

748 of elitism (.) because most of the Conservative  
 749 government have gone to Eton  
 750 B Or come from wealthy backgrounds  
 751 A Or yeah (.) and you know have gone to Oxbridge (.)and  
 752 whatever then the Conservative government hit back  
 753 and said well also most of your cabinet ministers have  
 754 also been to Oxbridge as well (.) people like Ruth Kelly  
 755 (.) David Milliband (.) and err (.) his brother

The extract starts with a key point from participant A, that politics is suffering because of scandals (lines 700-701). Participants A and B then say that these scandals are an on-going problem (lines 703-705). There is a sense that these events are seen as part of politics. The three participants then go on to discuss the scandal that was current at the time, the expenses scandal revealed in a series of stories by the Telegraph newspaper (Pattie and Johnston, 2012; Renwick et al, 2011). It is apparent that the problem with this particular event was not the appearance of dishonesty, in itself, rather the perception of ridiculousness in some of the claims (lines 706 – 714). This part of the extract was coded to the sub-theme code *Dishonesty*, mentioned earlier. In lines 713 and 715 participant A starts to ask a question. I presume the question would have been why would Members of Parliament do this but they are interrupted at line 716 by participant C. In the passage that follows, participant C first suggests that MPs have lost touch. This hinted at the code *Wealth and difference*, suggesting a distance between political representatives and the participants. The code highlighted the wealth and lifestyle of MPs, sometimes in contrast to the poverty of the participants, and suggested that this was a fundamental difference between the two groups. The code had some resonance with the idea of elitism (Schumpeter, 1987, Mills, 2000).

This code was used by 15 voting participants on 21 occasions in total and on ten occasions by nonvoting participants. Then the participant suggests that MPs are not only hypocritical because they are concerned about the queen's expenditure but at the same time they are wasting money and it is the participants or the electorates' money. As a result of making the claim in this way, the participant strengthens the claim by personalising it. This piece of text was then coded to *Personal losses* and all the examples of the code followed this pattern. This code was used on 56 occasions by 18 voting participants and on 12 occasions by non-voters. At line 726, participant B interjects but focuses more on the perceived wealth of MPs. That MPs are so wealthy makes their large expenses claims more reprehensible. This was coded to *Wealth and difference*. Lines 729 to 740 then return to the idea of *Personal losses* as the participant claims that the MPs expenses scandal is a moral issue because MPs were spending the participants or the electorates' money. From line 743 Participant A refocuses On Wealth and difference highlighting that it is an 'us and them kinda thing' (line 746) and then suggesting that politicians are an elite that has gone to prestigious private schools and Oxbridge.

The sub-theme seems to suggest that one of the processes that shaped voting behaviour in the participants was the creation in talk of the difference between them and politicians. The establishment of difference in talk between one group and another is an important discursive ploy which allows other to be treated less well (Wetherell and Potter, 1992). The consequence of talking about politicians in this manner is that the act of voting is inoculated against the range of claims to represent us that politicians may make (Saward, 2006). Whilst politicians are making a claim to represent us individuals are making a claim of difference back that attempts to refute that representative claim. This particular claim of difference is based on perceptions of

wealth, lifestyle and upbringing. This is furthered by the claim of *Personal losses* because by claiming ownership of a loss the impact of the difference is then brought to bear on the individual rather than being shouldered by wider society.

### 3.3.4 – Understanding the Distrust Theme

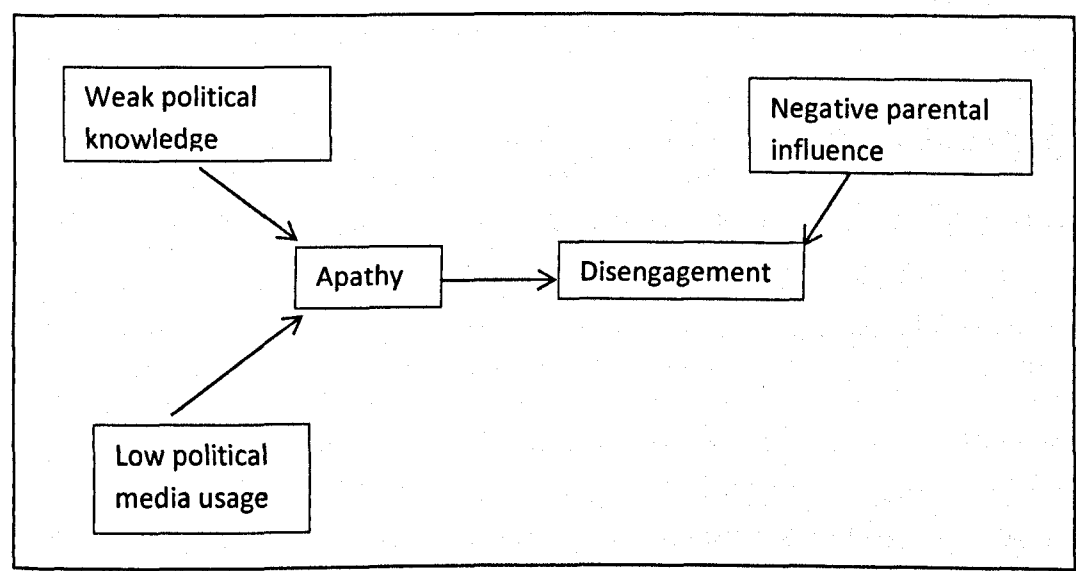
The three sub-themes link together within the main theme *Distrust*. The first sub-theme discussed *Relevance* highlighted the belief, particularly in young people that politics was inaccessible and that voting didn't make any difference to their lives, that it was something for older people with more of a stake in society. Part of this belief related to voting for a political party that did not win was consequently regarded as a *Wasted vote* but also the idea that there were many issues that government were powerless to deal with was important. This sub-theme then suggests broadly that there is little to gain from being involved in politics. The second sub-theme focused on the lack of ability to determine the truth, that either politicians or the media were lying. The construction of the sub-theme is quite important in that there is a level of complexity that makes the participants unsure of who is not telling the truth but enables them to be convinced that somebody is lying. This means that they can suggest wrongdoing without actually having to accuse somebody directly. This, for the participant, is easier to achieve in a number of ways; the information to back up claims can be less specific and the speaker is less open to criticism. The final sub-theme suggests that there is a difference between the participants and politicians. This is both an explanatory tool for the participants, it partly explains why politicians are acting in the manner they are, and allows the participants to be more accusatory towards politicians. The whole theme then resolves into the idea of *Distrust*. This is the ideas of politicians and the political system failing to meet people's needs and expectations and a sense of misinformation and distance about the political system. This theme as a

whole then suggests talk focusing on a significant degree of *Distrust* of the political system by part of the electorate which would shape individual’s behaviour towards abstaining from voting.

### 3.4 – The Disengagement Theme

The second theme to discuss was referred to as *Disengagement* and in comparison to the prior theme was far simpler, consisting of three codes and one sub-theme. The codes *Weak political knowledge* and *Low political media use* were connected to the sub-theme *Apathy*, which was linked to the idea in political sciences (Dean, 1960; Park, 1999). The code *Negative parental influence* stood alone. The theme is illustrated below in figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2 - Mapping the Disengagement Theme



To illustrate both the theme as a whole and how it internally connects, I will use three extracts, an extract from interview nine, an extract from interview ten and a short further extract from interview six included, principally, because the evidence for the final code is weaker in interview ten and the example will reinforce my comments. The first extract from interview nine illustrates the two codes connected to the sub-theme *Apathy*. It features three participants AD, AE and AF.



- 67 I Are you your kind of nodding (.) and telling me its
- 68 AE Yeah (.) I've (.) I've been if (.) it's like information (.)
- 69 what to vote for
- 70 I Right
- 71 AD Yeah
- 72 I You find the parties quite confusing
- 73 AE Yeah
- 74 AF Same
- 75 I Yeah
- 76 AF Exactly
- 77 I OK (.) so
- 78 AF I didn't want to vote because (.) I didn't know who to
- 79 vote for (.) in the first place (.) I didn't know what the
- 80 conservatives (.) or the other parties (.) I've heard of
- 81 them but
- 82 AD You don't know what they
- 83 AF Yeah (.) I don't know what they
- 84 AD You don't know what they stand for (.) yeah
- 85 I Right ok (.) ok cos (.) umm (.) no (.) I don't know if you
- 86 remember (.) it wasn't so much this time (.) but if we go
- 87 back a year (.) it was about a year ago (.) that the last
- 88 general election was on
- 89 AD Yep
- 90 I Do you remember any of the TV coverage

91 AD Not really

92 I No (.) do you not watch TV

93 AE Yeah

94 AD I do (.) I don't watch it much of it (.) cos umm

95 I It was all over the newspapers (.) can you remember

96 anything (2.0) there were some big debates in

97 parliament (.) big debates on the TV (.) did you see any

98 of the televised debates

99 AD I have seen like (.) a debate on the TV (.) and that was

100 umm (.) that was like (.) do you know the university

101 people (.) and they were like scaling up a building (.) but

102 I don't know if that was anything to do with it

103 I It might be

104 AD But that's (.) I did see that (.) that was like the final

105 debate

106 I Right (.) ok

107 AD I saw it with my mum

108 I Right (.) ok (.) and have you got any views on that (.) so

109 can you remember it all (.) were you aware of the

110 election

111 AF Yeah I was aware of it

112 I OK (.) so you know obviously (.) there was things going

113 on (.) on the TV (.) did you kind of avoid it or (.) did you

114 start looking at it and thought (.) oh I don't understand

115           this and come back (.) how did it go (.) how did it  
 116           happen  
 117    AE     What do you mean  
 118    AF     Well (.) what do you mean  
 119    I       Well did you (.) there was obviously lots of news  
 120           coverage  
 121    AF     So you're talking about the  
 122    I       You know (.) about what each party was doing  
 123    AF     Oh (.) no (.) no (.) I didn't listen to that  
 124    I       You didn't listen to it  
 125    AF     Nah  
 126    AE     Me neither  
 127    I       Do you normally listen to the news or (.) did you just  
 128           sort of like avoid it  
 129    AF     Umm (.) not really  
 130    AE     Sometimes listen (.) sometimes not  
 131    AF     Yeah (.) it depends (.) yeah

The extract starts with me asking a participant to explain their nodding. The participant AE had just been talking about the difficulty they had had attempting to vote in a prior election. They pick up on this and explain that they did not know who to vote for because they do not know what each party stands for. The other participants agree on this (lines 68-84). This was coded to *Weak political knowledge*. The code was used on six occasions by voters and on 12 occasions by non-voters. I wanted to explore this further and try repeatedly to draw them back to the coverage of the prior general election (lines 85-88, 90, 92, 95-98). Participant AD is most forthcoming but suggests

that they do not watch much TV. They do remember one TV debate (lines 99-103). I then try and open this area up further. The two other participants join in here and explain that although they were aware of the TV coverage they didn't listen to what the parties were proposing (lines 123-126). This passage was coded to *Low political media use* and this code was used solely by non-voters on 12 occasions.

The next two extracts illustrate the remainder of the code. The first extract is from later in the same transcript and consequently shows the connections between the codes in the talk of the participants. The extract shows the use of the central code of the sub-theme *Apathy* and the code *Negative parental influence*. The extract features five participants from interview ten AG, AH, AJ, AK and AL.

#### Extract 8, Transcript 10

- 245 I Right umm (.) Just a (.) sort of you mentioned it earlier  
246 but (.) what are your parents' attitudes towards voting  
247 AH My mum doesn't vote  
248 I Your mum doesn't vote  
249 AG She didn't this time (.) but my mum usually does (.) for  
250 Labour (.) cos they help the working class (.) it's what  
251 she tells me  
252 AJ I think my parent just vote the same vote cos (.) cos like  
253 from their parents kind of thing (.) they just always gone  
254 conservative  
255 I They always voted conservative  
256 AJ They just do (.) cos everyone else does (.) kinda (.)  
257 dunno

258 AK Yeah (.) my parent always voted for (.) I never really  
 259 listened to what they voted for  
 260 I Ok  
 261 AK I've no idea  
 262 AL My parents never really voted at all (.) that's probably  
 263 why I've never become interested in at all either (.)  
 264 since I've never been brought up into the kind of  
 265 I Yeah (.) it kind of (.) obviously if your (.) you know (.) it's  
 266 just something that I'm interested in exploring is (.) how  
 267 much your parents actually mention it (.) you know (.)  
 268 you say your parents do they not talk about it at all  
 269 AL No (.) not at all  
 270 I Now you claim  
 271 AK No (.) they do mention it (.) they do try and ask me to  
 272 vote and stuff (.) but I kinda just can't be bothered at  
 273 the time  
 274 I Oh (.) right (.) they're kinda (.) so are they quite keen on  
 275 you voting  
 276 AK Yeah  
 277 I Ok (.) and do they want you to vote in a particular way  
 278 AK No (.) they're just like read up and choose one of them  
 279 I Oh (.) ok

The extract starts with me asking the participants to go back to something they mentioned earlier in the interview regarding their parents' views on politics. The first participant says that their mum does not vote. Then two participants, AG and AJ start

discussing how their parents voted and this was linked to a code referred to as *Party identification* which will be discussed later in the chapter in relation to another theme. At line 255 I ask for some further information. This provokes problems for a couple of the participants. First participant AJ wants to answer the question and then realises that they are not sure of the answer and corrects themselves (lines 256-257). Then participant AK answers the same question and again corrects themselves explaining that they never really listen (lines 258-259). Repairs such as these are a common and well-documented part of speech and the manner in which they occur is orderly (Schlegoff et al, 1977). Participant AK then at various points in the interview alongside this one makes various comments which were coded as *Apathy* (lines 261, 269, 271 -273, 278). This code was constituted as an expression of disinterest that prevented a positive action. It was used on its own, distinct from the two linked codes *Weak political knowledge* and *Low political media* use on three occasions by voters and nine by non-voters. In between these apathetic comments, Participant AL expresses something different in, lines 262-264; here the participant explains that his parents do not vote and that is probably the reason he does not vote. This is a direct contrast to what the other participants were saying, and was probably in part provoked by them saying, that their parents had voted. This was coded to *Negative parental influence*. This code was a suggestion that the attitude of parents had shaped the attitudes of the participants negatively towards voting. It was used on ten occasions by non-voting participants.

Simply because there is little evidence of this code in the prior extract a further short extract, extract 9, is used to illustrate this code in more detail. This extract features participant S, two further participants were present but did not say anything in this passage of speech.

#### Extract 9, Transcript 6

- 509 I Umm you kind of said (.) oh yeah every vote makes a  
510 difference (.) uhh (.) your kind of sounding less and less  
511 like a person who doesn't vote  
512 S Yeah (.) but it's just that (.) say like my household (.) for  
513 instance  
514 I Yeah  
515 S We've never voted  
516 I Right

In this extract I am attempting, again, to provoke the participant into explaining more about his motivation for not voting (lines 509-511). The participant's answer is that his household has never voted. This is suggesting something about family identity akin, perhaps, to a tradition. The participant's family, and the participant, as part of it, see themselves as non-voters.

#### 3.4.1 - Understanding the Disengagement Theme

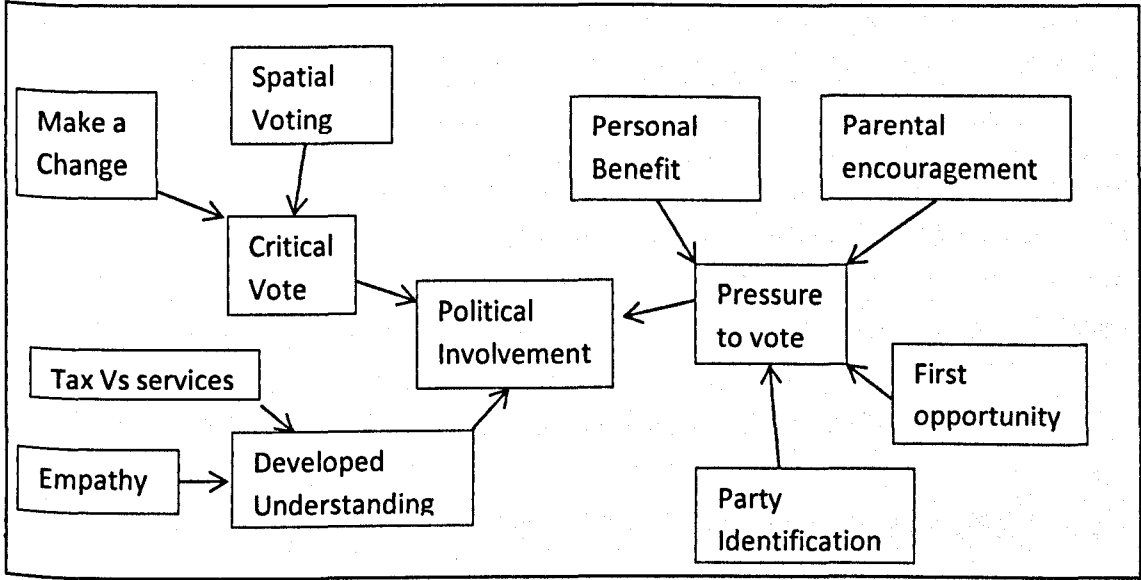
This then constitutes and examples the theme *Disengagement*. The first part of the theme is the sub-theme *Apathy*. This is constituted by the two codes *Weak political knowledge* and *Low political media use* linked to the code *Apathy*. The talk in these codes suggests that the participants that use them do not feel engaged by or interested in the political media or politics and this is something that perhaps they blame themselves for; it is because they cannot be bothered. The broad idea that they are not engaged in the political or the political media because they are apathetic then is likely to shape these participants into abstaining from voting. Only one explanation

was given by the participants for this behaviour. This was in the code *Negative parental influence*. This code seemed to account for the lack of engagement in some participants by suggesting that there was a non-political culture or identity within some families that was being inherited or passed down between generations.

### 3.5 – The Theme Political involvement

The first two themes considered in this chapter can, on balance, be seen to have a negative effect on the propensity to vote or engage politically. Their use by participants or individuals suggests that they are less likely to engage politically. The last two themes in this chapter, in contrast, suggest the opposite; a greater likelihood of engagement and voting. The first of these is the theme *Political involvement*. This theme was composed of three sub-themes, *Critical vote*, *Pressure to vote* and *Developed understanding* and is displayed in figure 3.3 below.

Figure 3.3 – Mapping the Political Involvement Theme



It was not possible to show the whole of the theme in one extract and, therefore, I will demonstrate the code initially in sub-themes and individual codes. The first sub-theme that I will consider was referred to as *Pressure to vote*. This was made up of four



distinct codes: *Personal Benefit*, *Parental encouragement*, *First opportunity* and *Party identification* centred on the code *Pressure to vote*.

The first extract below features three participants K, L and M and demonstrates the code *Personal benefit*.

Extract 10, Transcript 4

- 73 I Ok (.) so this business of kinda voting (.) you know sort  
74 of umm (.) did you (.) do you all (.) did you all vote for  
75 parties (.) that didn't get in  
76 K I can't remember (.) to be honest  
77 M I think I voted for the ones that (.) just sounded most  
78 sensible  
79 I Right (.) Ok  
80 M Probably that would have benefited me (.) which is  
81 probably the main reason why everyone votes you  
82 know (.) to benefit them  
83 I Right  
84 L That's what I do (.) I voted for Lib Dem (.) I have always  
85 been quite open about that (.) because all of their  
86 promises seemed to (.) like everything they were saying  
87 benefited me (.) at that time and in the immediate  
88 future

The extract starts with me asking a probing question regarding how the participants had voted. The first participant is unable to answer the question (line 76) and consequently, the second participant is able to alter the conversation, suggesting that

they voted on the basis of what was most sensible (lines 77-78). This is developed from line 80 onwards. The participant explains that they vote for the party that benefits them the most and that this would govern the manner in which they voted in future. This was coded to *Personal benefit*. The code suggests that voting is about the personal utilitarian gain for the individual concerned. This might be described by rational choice theorists as voting out of rational, selfish, self-interest (Miller, 1999) and it was used on 12 occasions by voters and eight occasions by non-voters.

A second extract from the same transcript demonstrates two further codes, *Parental encouragement* and *First opportunity*, from the same sub-theme, as well as codes from other themes.

#### Extract 11, Transcript 4

- 547 I Yeah (.) what was the critical thing
- 548 L I think (.) the main reason (.) I decided straight away
- 549 that I was going to vote was (.) because (.) pretty much
- 550 because I could (.) it was the first time I could vote
- 551 I right
- 552 L I think that was probably the main reason (.) and so that
- 553 I could then complain if it didn't go my way
- 554 I And you
- 555 K Yeah (.) I thought (.) cos I could vote and umm (.) I could
- 556 complain (.) I hate it when people do complain (.) and
- 557 they didn't vote (.) so I didn't want to be one of those
- 558 people (.) if I voted (.) I wanted to complain
- 559 I You (.) mike

560 M Same (.) cos I could vote

561 I Do you think umm (.) do you think the way you think

562 about voting (.) is different from the way your parents

563 think about it (.) or is it

564 K No (.) because I think everyone has a thing that (.) if you

565 don't vote then you can't complain (.) and that (.) I

566 would say (.) in my opinion (.) that is the main reason

567 why most people vote is because (.) if you don't vote (.)

568 you can't complain (.) and everyone complains about

569 the government all the time (.) and if you voted then

570 you can (.) kind of complain about the government so (.)

571 that's what I think

572 L I think the reasons for voting would be different for me

573 (.) than they are for like my dad (.) because he'll be

574 looking more at the umm (.) at the economy side of

575 things (.) he'll be more interested in what the (.) what

576 they plan to do with the bank of England (.) or that part

577 where at the moment for me it (.) it just doesn't strike

578 me as one of the main things for me

579 I Right (.) OK

580 M Yeah (.) I've (.) first for me was like (.) yes (.) just support

581 him (.) you know (.) my parents and stuff (.) but now it's

582 just kinda hit me like seeing the way you know

583 everything just gone up (.) you know (.) hitting a certain

584 age you know (.) gets you thinking a little bit you know

585           (.) maybe you should take this seriously and you know  
 586           (.) for a little bit more (.) get into it a little bit (.) to make  
 587           sure that you know things are OK for you  
 588    I       Right (.) umm (.) do your (.) do your parents (.) do you  
 589           think they always want you to vote (.) did they bring you  
 590           up this way  
 591    L       My parents never like said (.) oh you have to vote (.) but  
 592           they never (.) because they always (.) they always vote  
 593           so (.) it kind of just (.) it just seemed natural for me (.)  
 594           that I when I can I should go out and vote (.) it wasn't  
 595           like drilled into me at a young age

The extract started with me, asking the participants what had been the most important thing in the participants' decision to vote. Participant L replies and explains that they had voted simply because it was the first time that they could (lines 548-550). This was coded to *First opportunity*. The code was used on five occasions by voters. The code suggests the participants are simply waiting for the opportunity to vote and are already willing and ready to do so. From lines 552 to 558, first participant L explains that they also voted because that gave them a right to complain and the participant K reiterates the comment. This passage was coded to *Right to complain*. The code linked to the theme of moral voting discussed later in this chapter. I then try and move the conversation onto the subject of parental influence (lines 561-563). The initial response to this by participant K was to repeat the code *Right to complain* (lines 564-571). Then participant L explains that their parents consider different things from them (lines 572-579). This was coded to *Age affects attitude to voting* mentioned earlier in the chapter. Participant M interjects at line 580. The passage is a little unclear

but the participants explain that they first took a lead about how to vote from how their parents voted but that later they realised that they needed to think about the issues and who to vote for, for themselves. The participant L explains that it wasn't anything that was said but that his voting was provoked by the example that his parents set. This was coded to *Parental encouragement*. The code suggested that there was a broad voting culture in certain households that made voting seemed normal. The code was used on 14 occasions by voters and on 6 occasions by non-voters.

The next extract illustrates a further code illustrated with the sub-theme this code was referred to as *Party identification*. The code was not particularly prevalent or easily distinguishable in interviews and, consequently, an example was not identified in transcript four however one was found from another transcript. The example shown is from extract 11 and features a single participant AN. Three further participants AM, AO and AP were present but did not say anything in the extract.

#### Extract 12, Transcript 11

- 694 I Well (.) so how confusing do you find it (.) how diff (.)  
695 how much do you know about it  
696 AN Umm (.) I know like a bit about sort of like the parties  
697 and stuff (.) but umm (.) I did (.) I think with the Labour  
698 (.) they basically though (.) they sort of help the kind of  
699 person that I am (.) so like  
700 I Right  
701 AN My mum's like a single parent (.) so at the age like I  
702 really felt love (.) which is really good (.) but then it's like

703           (.) I think that its (.) you know you vote for them (.)  
 704           because they're helping you out (.) but then they do  
 705           other stuff (.) so some of its just (.) I think all of them are  
 706           a bit just (.) na na (.) they need to make a noise

The transcript starts with me asking a secondary probing question after the participant has suggested that they find politics confusing. The passage that then follows is quite complex. First, in lines 697-704, there is a sense of *Party identification* from participant AN which was coded as such. It is also apparent there is some sense of diffuse *Personal gain* as discussed earlier in the chapter. It is also clear from the statements around these codes in lines 696 - 697 and 704 - 706 that the *Party identification* is qualified and tentative. The code *Party identification* was used on three occasions by voters and four by non-voters. The codes suggested that the participants were identifying with a particular party however in each case this was qualified in some way.

The final code in this sub-theme is an eponymous central code, *Pressure to vote*. The example shown below is again from transcript four which exemplifies the links between the codes. It features participants K and M; a further participant was present but did not say anything in the passage of speech.

#### Extract 13, Transcript 4

148    I       Right OK (.) alright so umm (.) what kind of (.) you know  
 149       we talked earlier or you mentioned earlier that you get  
 150       a lot of stuff through the post (.) how (.) how influential  
 151       do you think is (.) the kind of run up to the election for  
 152       you (.) in persuading you to vote(.) can you (.) can you

153 go through life ignoring it (.) do you think (.) or is it too  
 154 much or is  
 155 M It's always like (.) it's always like pressure  
 156 K Yeah  
 157 M You just keep getting it (.) everywhere you go it's just  
 158 there (.) on the news (.) wherever you just turn (.)  
 159 newspapers  
 160 I Mmm  
 161 M It's just there (.) I get a load through my door  
 162 I And was it good (.) or bad  
 163 M Its good (.) cos (.) well they try to get people's attention  
 164 I Yes  
 165 M To choose how they want this country to run

The extract starts with me asking the participants to explain further the effect of election literature that they had mentioned earlier in the interview. From lines 155 to 159 there is a passage of speech from two participants that was coded as *Pressure to vote*. This *Pressure to vote* is seen as broadly positive (lines 161-163). This was the central code of the sub-theme and indicates the broad idea behind this theme that there is a push to vote and at the simplest level to get involved in politics.

The manner in which the other codes mentioned in relation to this sub-theme contribute to it are apparent also. Each of the codes exhibits a certain pressure or push towards voting and politics but from slightly different direction. There is the obvious idea that for some voting was for *Personal gain*. It is also unsurprising that *Parental encouragement* was important. *Party identification* was quite often qualified but there was the sense that voting for certain parties seemed natural for a few of the participants. Finally, there was a

sense that there was a build of pressure to participate for a number of participants as they reached voting age and had the *First opportunity* to vote.

### 3.5.2 – The sub-theme Critical Vote

The next sub-theme that I will consider is referred to as *Critical vote*. The sub-theme was composed of two codes, *Make a change* and *Spatial voting* and the eponymous central code, *Critical vote*. The first of these codes is illustrated in extract 14 below featuring three participants V, W and Y from interview seven. A fourth participant X was present but did not say anything in this extract.

#### Extract 14, Transcript 7

731 I Do you umm (.) you know there's been obviously lots of  
732 media stuff (.) trying to persuade people to vote (.)  
733 umm (.) but you know (.) once you decided to vote (.)  
734 you mentioned you know sort of (.) some kind of  
735 struggle over who to vote for (.) umm (.) which is  
736 affecting you most (.) are you all fairly committed to  
737 voting

738 V Umm (.) yeah (.) I suppose so

739 W I only voted because umm (.) I thought well (.) like I say  
740 (.) something needed to change (.) I didn't think my vote  
741 was gonna make any bit of difference at all (.) at the  
742 bottom (.) which is why I didn't do the local elections

743 I Right

744 Y Simply again (.) if I've got the time I'll do it (.) if I don't (.)  
745 cos obviously (.) my daily things that I do every day (.) I



746 think they take more preference (.) more umm (.)  
 747 precedence over (.) voting in my personal view  
 748 V I like voting just (.) because I can  
 749 I Right  
 750 V That's the reason (.) because I can do it (.) but it will  
 751 make a change (.) so I'm gonna do it

The extract starts with me asking a probing question regarding the extent to which these participants were committed to voting as they had talked about being unsure over who to vote for earlier in the interview (lines 731-737). Participant V then initially responds hesitantly which suggested that they have more to say (line 738) but they are interrupted by participant W who say they voted because that something needed to change. They explain, presumably to emphasise their first point that they did not vote in the local election because that wouldn't make any difference. This suggests that the candidate did believe that his voting in the general election would change something (lines 739-742). This was coded to *Make a change*. Participant Y then explains that they value voting less than their usual activities and they would do it if time allowed (lines 744 -745). This was linked to the sub-theme *Apathy* mentioned earlier. Finally, participant V re-joins the conversation suggesting that they too voted because it would *Make a change*. The code suggested that the participants that were using it believed in the efficacy of the voting system to a high degree; that an individual vote could change government policy or performance. It was used on 10 occasions solely by voters.

The second code from this theme is demonstrated in an extract from interview one. The code was referred to as *Spatial voting* and was an example of behaviour explained originally by Stokes (1963, 1992). The extract features two participants B and C, a third participant A was present but did not say anything in this passage of speech.

- 107 I Ok (.) alright (.) and what's your situation (.) is it similar
- 108 C Um (.) no, it's not that I (.) it's not that I get excited (.) I
- 109 do get more interested umm (.) the more interested I
- 110 get the more differences I can tell (right) between the
- 111 party policies (right) so my vote does change maybe
- 112 year on year um (.) depending on where I am voting or
- 113 what I am doing
- 114 I So you voted for different parties
- 115 C Oh yea um (.) I've yet to vote conservative I think I
- 116 might this year (.) I think it will go that way because they
- 117 got an interesting idea for air tax that suits me (.) a lot
- 118 more than any one of the other party's policies at the
- 119 moment
- 120 B Air tax?
- 121 C Yeah, I know they got other things
- 122 B You're going to vote for a party based on air tax
- 123 C Maybe because (.) no I will actually because it affects
- 124 me the most umm (.) I vote for liberal democrats when I
- 125 was a student because that affected me the most what
- 126 they were going on (.) even though they're green
- 127 policies was absolutely haywire (.) I didn't like their
- 128 green policies I voted for them because it affected me
- 129 as a student I voted for labour when I was working
- 130 because it affected me more conservatives

The extract starts with me asking one participant what the situation was in the locality that they voted in. This was after participant B had been explaining that they felt their vote for the Labour party was in a Conservative-dominated area and that, consequently, they felt less interested now in politics. Participant C then explains that their situation is different and that they are not apathetic about the situation but rather they are quite interested in the different party's policies. They go on to explain that because of what the Conservative party is planning to do with regard to air tax that they may vote for them (lines 115-119). Participant B is then quite incredulous because to vote for a particular party on the basis of air tax alone seems unbelievable to them (lines 120 – 122).

Participant C is then forced to defend their prior position somewhat and, therefore, gives another example of voting based on policy and gives further reasons for their position on air tax (lines 123-123). This passage of speech by participant C was coded to *Spatial voting*. The code indicated speech where participants were comparing, voting or showing support for political parties based on policies. Although the meaning was different, there was some obvious overlap between this code and the code *Personal benefits*. The key difference between the codes being the element of comparison between the parties in Spatial voting. Consequently, in a number of cases passages were coded to both codes. The code was used on five occasions by voters and twice by non-voters.

The final code in the sub-theme was the central code *Critical vote*. This is demonstrated in the extract overleaf from interview eight and is similar to the idea of a decisive vote found in rational choice theories (Downs, 1957; Riker and Ordeshook, 1968). The transcript features three participants AA, AB and AC.

Extract 16, Transcript 8

- 284 I Right (.) no (.) ok umm (2.0) so do you think voting  
285 makes a difference
- 286 AC Yes
- 287 AB I don't (.) I don't know (.) I don't hold that line
- 288 AA I don't know
- 289 AC I think it does really cos (.) I remember back during  
290 those general elections (.) and some people didn't get to  
291 vote because (.) they were late or something (.) and it  
292 created like a big hassle (.) where (.) I think it was in  
293 London or something
- 294 I Yeah (.) there was some (.) some talk about that (.)  
295 wasn't there (.) like yeah I remember (.) there were  
296 queues outside polling stations (.) and some people  
297 couldn't get through (.) how would you feel if that was  
298 you
- 299 AA I'd walk off to McDonalds or somewhere else then (.)  
300 yeah (.) whatever
- 301 I Right (.) ok (.) umm (.) alright so (.) you think it's quite  
302 important
- 303 AC I think it's important because (.) at the end of the day (.)  
304 every vote counts
- 305 I Go on
- 306 AC Because like (.) if there's like (.) just say two parties (.)  
307 and they vote (.) and they've got exactly the same

308 amount of votes (.) and if one person hasn't voted (.)  
309 that would be really important (.) because that way (.)  
310 one party could still win

The extract starts with me asking the participants whether or not they thought that voting makes a difference (lines 284-285). Two of the participants express different views from participant AC (lines 286 -288). This causes them to defend their position, that voting matters, so they initially cite an example from the prior 2010 election where problems had been created because of queues outside polling stations (lines 289-293). I then clarify this for them (lines 294-298). At this point there is an interruption, participant AA suggests that voting for them would not be that important (lines 299-300). Then participant AC expresses the importance of a single vote first by saying that every vote counts and then suggesting that each vote could be critical to the outcome of an election (lines 303-310). This central code, *Critical vote*, was used on seven occasions by voters and five occasions by non –voters.

The sub-theme suggests then that that the importance of an individual voter is greater than expected and that an individual can directly achieve something through voting. The code *Make a change* suggest that individuals believe their vote will make a difference, consequently, it is worth considering the differences between parties' policies and voting as in the code *Spatial voting*. Each of these codes emphasise the importance of voting and because each individual vote is important and could be critical to the outcome of an election this leads to the central code *Critical vote*.

### **3.5.3 - The Sub-theme Developed Understanding**

The final sub-theme in the *Political involvement* theme that I am going to consider was referred to as *Developed understanding*. This sub-theme was constituted by two

subsidiary codes, *Tax Vs services* and *Empathy*. In this case there was no central eponymous code, rather the sub-theme *Developed understanding* was formed by the analytic link and connection between the subsidiary codes. The first of these codes that is illustrated is *Tax vs services*. This is demonstrated in the extract below featuring two participants, AR and AS from transcript 12. A third participant was present but did not say anything

Extract 17, transcript 12

- 227 I Yeah
- 228 AR And (.) and it's not just like by a little percentage (.) it's
- 229 quite a lot (.) it's going up (.) and a umm (.) I think it's
- 230 gonna make things worse (.) and also they want people
- 231 in charge (.) for example (.) of things run by the
- 232 government
- 233 I Right
- 234 AR They are going to decrease (.) like the libraries and stuff
- 235 I Yeah
- 236 AR And they are trying to just rely on volunteers to do that
- 237 I Yeah (.) yeah
- 238 AR Because they don't want to employee people (.) I just
- 239 think that it is so (.) umm
- 240 AS Inconsiderate
- 241 AR Inconsiderate (.) exactly
- 242 I Yes

243 AR So selfish and inconsiderate (.) they could save money  
 244 on other (.) on other avenues (.) but they're just picking  
 245 the things that really matter to the (.) to the community  
 246 I Right  
 247 AR Not just the taxpayer  
 248 AS I reckon (.) they should deal with facts  
 249 AR Yeah (.) exactly  
 250 AS I reckon they just looked at the libraries (.) and been like  
 251 (.) ahh that's decreased (.) lets shut it down  
 252 AR Honestly

The extract starts after a short encouraging yeah by me. Participant AR begins with comments about the cost of living going up and government privatisation of services (lines 228-232). They go on to point out that library services are being cut and that this is partly being achieved through using volunteers. This is seen as damaging to employment (lines 234-239). This is not only seen as thoughtless by two of the participants (lines 240-241) but also arbitrary and deliberately aimed at the provision for wider society. The cuts are seen as something that is hurting wider society whilst benefiting taxpayers (lines 243-248). The feeling of arbitrariness is then repeated (lines 249-253). This passage was coded to *Tax vs services*. The code was used on three occasions by non-voters. The code was an expression of the conflict that some of the participants felt between paying for services or cutting taxes.

The final code in the sub-theme was referred to as Empathy. This code is demonstrated in the example overleaf from transcript 1. It features all three of the participants, A, B and C, involved in the interview.

Extract 18, Transcript 1

- 266 I Do you think it's about personalities
- 267 C Not per- (.) it might be at times
- 268 A I do in the past
- 269 B It is (.) I think it's definitely about personalities
- 270 C David Cameron I (.) I (.) trust him like there's no
- 271 tomorrow (.) I trust Gordon Brown more but the thing is
- 272 I don't like the Conservative party policies so (.) I want
- 273 to vote Conservative but I don't trust that man at all so
- 274 (.) I dunno
- 275 B Not speaking of voting against David because they don't
- 276 like Gordon Brown (.) because they think he's not very
- 277 charismatic
- 278 A Yeah
- 279 C I know (.) its (.) sad because most of his economic
- 280 policies to date (.) have actually been spot on (.) don't
- 281 get me wrong I don't agree with all of them (.) Tony
- 282 Blair has actually tried in certain cases to stake his
- 283 identity they were mine they were that good and he
- 284 disagreed with them originally I always found that
- 285 amusing (.) but I actually trust him more than I trust
- 286 David Cameron and David Cameron makes me want to
- 287 foam at the mouth (laughs) he makes me very cringy (.)
- 288 but you know (go on) what David Cameron (yeah) umm



289           (.) it's just that um (.) you sort of hear a thing (.) certain  
290           things (.) about him from reliable sources (.) or you  
291           assume are reliable you would find and that makes you  
292           very(.) hesitant to trust him sometimes when he says it  
293           on camera and he's doing (.) and he's probably doing  
294           what he needs to get voted (.) I'll be quite honest but  
295           he (.) he looks just so underhanded

The extract starts with me asking about whether politics is about personalities. This was a follow-up question relating to trust in politics. There are some initial disagreement and repairs in conversation between the participants. Participant C starts off saying no then corrects themselves and uses a qualified response that suggests some hesitation. Participant A also gives a qualified response then participant B is quite strongly in agreement with the original question (lines 266-269). This then perhaps prompts or allows participant C to be more forthcoming in their answer. Participant C then discusses the extent that they trust David Cameron in comparison to Gordon Brown. They suggest that they don't like Conservative policies. This appears to be an error and I think that they mean labour policies. Consequently, they want to vote Conservative but distrust David Cameron (lines 270-273). At this point B challenges what has been said suggesting that this is a vote for David Cameron because of Gordon Brown's perceived lack of charisma (lines 275-277). Then participant C responds first offering some mitigation for their view highlighting Gordon brown competence although not agreeing with all of the policies (lines 279-281) then suggesting that Tony Blair tried to claim credit for the policies (lines 281-284) then there follows a detailed explanation of how untrustworthy David Cameron is perceived to be by the participant (lines 285 – 295). This was code to the code *Empathy*. The code indicates a detailed and complex emotional response to a politician or

politics by a participant. The code was used on five occasions by voters and on three occasions by non-voters.

### **3.5.4 - Understanding the Theme Political involvement**

The sub-theme, *Political involvement*, then suggested through the two codes, *Tax vs services* and *Empathy*, that when these ideas were being used by the participants that they were engaging in politics in a more substantive and complex manner. They had thought and considered certain issues in a deeper rather than superficial way.

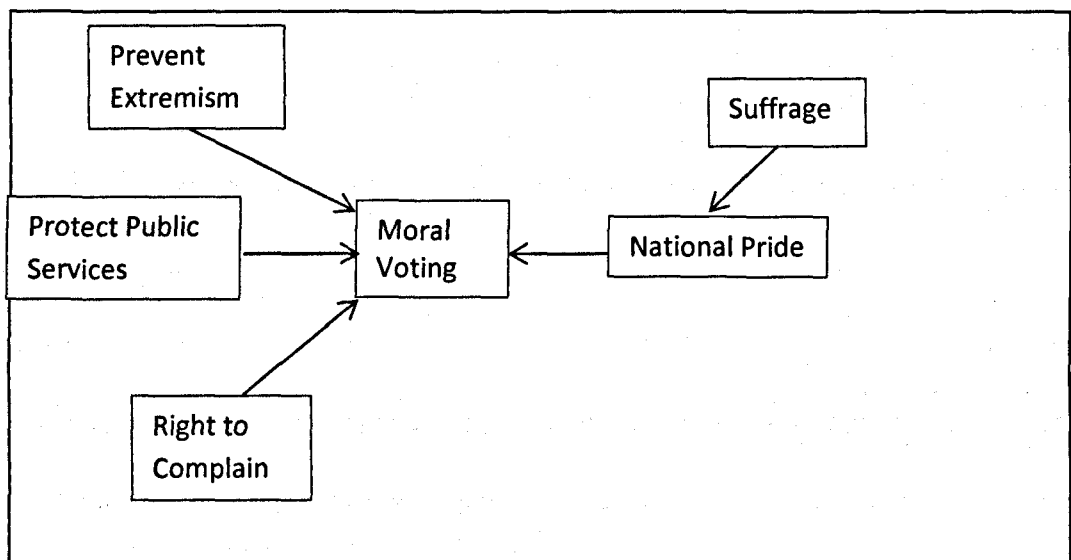
The theme as a whole is the constituted by the three sub-themes. The first of the sub-themes was *Pressure to vote*. This was composed of a number of codes that suggested to the participants that they should vote: there was something to gain through voting, their parents wanted them to vote, there was some *Party identification* and that this was the first time that they could. The next sub-theme *Critical vote* was different in terms levels of motivation it developed in the participants. The three codes within it suggested that not only should the participant vote that it was very important that they do so. First, because they preferred one party's policies over another. Second, they thought it important that something changed and they believed this could happen through the electoral system and finally they believed that their vote could be decisive. With the final sub-theme *Developed understanding* the three sub-themes work together to suggest to the participants that they are politically engaged and motivated and are, consequently, more likely to vote.

## **3.6 - The Theme Moral Voting**

The final theme identified was referred to as *Moral voting*. This theme, unlike the prior themes, consisted of just five codes and one sub-theme. The sub-theme was referred to as *National pride* and one of the codes, *Suffrage*, linked into it. Three codes *Right to*

*complain*, *Protect public services* and *Prevent extremism* were then linked to the central idea of *Moral voting* as distinct codes. The theme is shown in figure 3.4 below. It is apparent and arguable that the theme could be considered simply as a sub-theme of the prior *Political involvement* theme. Having said that, the theme suggests an important justification for voting and a different dimension to the process which is worthwhile considering separately.

**Figure 3.4 – Mapping the Moral Voting Theme**



### 3.6.1 - The Sub-theme National Pride

The sub-theme in the theme was referred to as *National pride* and was composed of the central eponymous code and the code *Suffrage*. The whole of the sub-theme can be seen in the extract from interview 11 below as well as the code, *Right to complain*, also part of the theme. The extract features two participants AM and AP. A further two participants AN and AO were present but did not speak in this passage.

#### Extract 19, Transcript 11

30 I why do you think you should vote (.) why (.) why do you  
31 vote

32 AM Umm (2.0) just think that (.) if you're gonna complain  
 33 about society or whatever (.) or the problems with it (.) I  
 34 don't think you've got the right to (.) unless you've  
 35 voted really

36 I Right

37 AM I think you're (.) that it (.) the country being run (.) it's  
 38 your country (.) I think you should have a bit of pride in  
 39 it (.) and a bit of interest in it (.) in how it's being run (.)  
 40 saying that though my extent of knowledge isn't  
 41 fabulous (.) but I (.) think it's important people should  
 42 probably take a little interest in it

43 I Right

44 AP Well (.) I think it's either my great or great grandmother  
 45 (.) she was one of the suffragettes

46 I Oh (.) ok

47 AP And she actually kind of went (.) to prison and stuff like  
 48 that (.) like doing it

49 I Alright

50 AP So the reason why I vote is more (.) family history type  
 51 reason (.) like

52 I Right

53 AP I feel like I should because (.) the fact that (.) my (.) like  
 54 one of my relatives (.) actually went to prison (.) for my  
 55 right to vote

56 I Right

57     AP     And that's the kind of reason why I try and vote (.)  
58             because it's like (.) I (.) my (.) if I didn't have the vote  
59             now I'd mind that I wouldn't (.) so I might as well take  
60             the opportunity (.) that I now (.) do have the vote

The extract starts with me asking a very broad early question simply asking people why they vote. This followed on an earlier question confirming that the participants present had voted. The first participant is a bit hesitant and there is a pause. They then explain that they believe that if you do not vote then you lose your right to complain about society or government (lines 32-35). This was coded to *Right to complain*. The code was the simple idea that voting gave a right to complain that non-voters did not morally have. The code was used on 10 occasions solely by voters. I acknowledged this and then the participant explained further that they think it is important that people take an interest in their country and how it is run. This was the central code in the sub-theme and it occurred in a range of interviews and was referred to as *National pride*. The code was the idea that it was important for people to vote because of a sense of pride in the country: that voting and politics were part of shared heritage that we should cherish. The code was used on seven occasions again solely by voters. At this point, the other participant AP joins the conversation. They explain that for them there are personal family reasons for voting. One of their great grandparents was a suffragette who had gone to prison as part of the campaign for women to get the vote (Lizzeri and Persico, 2004; Mayhall, 2003) and that the vote is important to them and it would make a difference to their lives if they did not have it (lines 44-60). There is a sense of gratitude and acknowledgement for a person's sacrifice in order to give others the vote that comes across in the talk. This was coded to the second code in the sub-theme *Suffrage*. Whilst, the code was usually used in reference to women's suffrage (ibid) there were comments regarding the sacrifice of

people in the Second World War that were also coded to this code. The code emphasised the sacrifice of some to gain or protect the right to vote and that individuals should vote partly out of an acknowledgement of the sacrifices made. The code was used on five occasions again solely by voters. The sub-theme then focuses on a pride in British democracy that needs to be protected, valued and cherished. Part of this pride is linked to the sacrifices that people have made in order for women to gain the vote in the UK and the sacrifices that other have made against totalitarian regimes to protect democracy.

The next code in the theme *Moral voting* demonstrated is *Prevent extremism*. This is shown in the extract below from interview two and features three participants D, E and F.

Extract 20, Transcript 2

- 191 E Everyone's equal (.) then you've got the extreme side  
192 which I think the BNP (.) that stuff was that (.) what a  
193 couple of months ago  
194 F Yeah (.) because he was on telly wasn't he (.) or  
195 something  
196 D The only point I want to make about the BNP is that  
197 they're racist but (.) I don't actually know if that's true  
198 (.) is that true  
199 F It's the British National Party so (.) I don't know what  
200 that actually means I know they just like (.) all you hear  
201 about them is them being racist (.) they probably have  
202 (.) they probably have great policies

203 D But who are they racist towards because (.) there's lots  
 204 of different ethnicities involved in that party  
 205 F I think (.) well from what I understand it's pretty much  
 206 like Hitler  
 207 E Yeah  
 208 F Minus the deaths  
 209 D They just want some kind of (.) ideal race  
 210 F Yeah just white (.) white (.) white all the way through (.)  
 211 so (.) I think that it's anyway

The extract starts with E explaining that they feel that the British National Party (BNP) are extreme (lines 191-192). This is part of a discussion that started with the question at line 81 from me do you ever feel pressurised into voting. This is not included in the extract because of the amount of material between that point and the code but it does relate to the code. Participants D and E then say that the BNP are racist (lines 196 - 201). This causes some problem because of the BNPs habit of putting forward members of ethnic minorities forward as spokespeople causing participant D to question the idea. Participant F then compares the BNP to Nazi Germany (lines 205 - 210). This was coded to *Prevent extremism* and was the idea that you should vote to stop extremist parties getting into politics. The code was used on ten occasions by voters and once by a non-voter.

The final code in this theme is *Protect public services*. This is demonstrated in the extract overleaf from interview six. The extract features two participants, S and T. A third participant R was present but did not say anything during the extract.

Extract 21, Transcript 6

- 73 S But (.) umm (.) that's one of them (.) and (.) and the  
74 other one I was (.) we (.) my school was part of a bit  
75 trying to stop the government from closing us down  
76 I Right  
77 T Ryeish Green  
78 S Yep (.) because of  
79 I Sorry (.) which school  
80 T Ryeish Green School  
81 I Oh Ryeish green (.) yeah (.) yeah (.) yeah (.) yeah (.) I  
82 went there  
83 T And (.) it (.) the government didn't do anything (.) and  
84 we tried (.) we did everything (.) our school did loads of  
85 things (.) we did umm (.) protests and (.) loads of  
86 different things just to try and stop this (.) the (.) the  
87 government from trying to move us out and (.) basically  
88 they're just building a new school (.) so (.) they're (.)  
89 they're (.) they've already closed us down (.) they've  
90 already closed Ryeish Green down (.) and (.) umm (.) it's  
91 just like (.) like what do they do (.) I mean

The extract is prompted by me asking the participants if they have ever taken part in unconventional political activities. Following that from line 74 onwards the two participants talk about a campaign they were involved in to stop their school being closed down which was unsuccessful but they recount some of the lengths that they have gone to in order to try and achieve their aim. This was coded to *Protect public services*. This



code consisted of participants discussing various measures that they had taken to protect public services. It was used on seven occasions by voters and five occasions by non-voters.

### **3.6.2 –Understanding the Theme Moral Voting**

This last theme was composed of the three independent codes and the sub-theme *National pride*. The sub-theme was broadly about the sacrifices that people had made to preserve or establish democracy in the UK and in particular women during their fight for enfranchisement and that these sacrifices had placed a moral obligation on current voters to participate. The other codes had similar moral messages. *Right to complain* suggested that by not voting individuals had to put up with what they received from government and had no right to complain. *Prevent extremism* suggested that if we did not vote there was a danger that we might let in an extremist party that we wholly disagreed with and finally *Protect public services* suggested that if we did nothing to protect public services they could be lost to us. Each of the codes gave a moral push that encouraged those using them to vote.

## **3.7 – Conclusions and Critical Reflections**

Having presented evidence for the four themes and the various sub-themes and codes that constituted them, it is important to reflect on this because of the critical role that I played in the coding process. To understand the coding, it is important to understand how I felt and what I brought into the process on a personal, on a disciplinary and on a methodological level.

I, personally, am in the eighth year of a Ph.D. and that brings a lot of issues into coding. Naturally, I am very eager to finish and it is easy to jump to conclusions regarding coding. This is exacerbated because my life has moved on since I started doing the Ph.D. and I

have a lot more demands on my time than when I started. When I started the Ph.D. I had no children, now I have three. I am also conscious that I am still a student and not very experienced in research and consequently this makes me somewhat tentative and hesitant in the coding. At the same time, I am aware that I am very different from the participants in this study. I am an academic involved in politics and consequently, I probably approach the subject on a different level from my participants. Quite often in the coding process, I have been very conscious of not truly understanding the nuances of what the participants have been saying. This could be the tentativeness and hesitation that I mentioned or it may point to differences in culture. This awareness emphasises the value of the processes of peer and member checking that I have used to confirm the coding and thematic analysis that I undertook.

On a disciplinary level, two points are really important. First, there is a sense that because I am coming at this from a broadly political science perspective that other possibilities of coding are either not seen or perhaps seen as less attractive in some way. My coding consequently has a political science flavour to it. I use terms such as participation and party identity. This is essentially showing how the talk of the participants is coded through the lens of my experience and views and the coding is consequently co-produced. A further consequence of my academic experiences is that there is an inevitable tension between political science and psychology particularly in terms of the language that is used; for instance, it is usual in political science to talk about propensities to do something such as vote whilst it is more common to talk about attitudes in psychology. This reflects to a degree, the individual focus in psychology opposed to the societal wide focus in political science. This was an area that I needed to be conscious of, although I was aware that this tension was a feature of a number of cross-disciplinary areas such as

social psychology and it has already been successfully overcome. One particular area of tension was the process of reflection itself because of the manner in which scholarly work is reported across the two disciplines. In political science it is normal to report research in the third person as in the hard sciences however the process of reflection requires you to own and talk about issues on a more personal level.

Finally, the last area of reflection focused on the methodological issues in the research. This was principally an outcome of the different approaches inherent in social constructionism and realism. There was a two issue for me regarding methodology. The first was the realisation that I was more comfortable with a realist approach. A number of the codes use similar passages of speech to demonstrate them. This is because in social constructionism a single piece of text may be associated with different interpretations and perspectives. I found this difficult to accept and often found myself looking for an alternative passage that would equally well demonstrate the code and solely that code and this was partly because this would sit better within a realist framework. The understanding helped but there are a number of points in this chapter where I begin to be apologetic because of the similarity in examples used rather than relying on differences in meaning. The second linked issue was the awareness that my views on how the codes linked and fitted together were, even with the quality measures undertaken, simply a perspective and that there were probably a number of equally good frameworks which could explain the codes. This again was uncomfortable for me and reflects possibly the manner in which realism is ingrained in western society and has an impact on all of us.

## **Chapter Four**

# **How the Themes deployed by Participants Shaped their Propensity to Vote**

### **4.1 - Introduction**

The themes and codes identified in chapter three were partly a product of explanations of attitudes to voting, discussed in chapter one, and the consequent prompt questions in the interview topic guide discussed in chapter two. These questions focused on the participants' propensity to vote (Blais and St Vincent, 2011) and the consequent attitudes to voting of the participants of this study at the time of and shortly after the 2010 UK general election. The questions led to the participants' talk regarding their propensity to vote.

The aims of this chapter, as part of a consideration of what social constructionist social psychology could possibly be used for and achieve in political science, are to consider:

- what these themes suggest about the propensity to vote of the participants in this study; and
- what the implications of this could, possibly, be for wider political science and the study of propensity to vote in particular.

It is important to note that, this study was a small-scale study of propensity to vote linked to a single general election aimed, principally, at exploring the use of a methodology rather than determining the causes of propensity to vote broadly. Within realist approaches a wider more representative sample of participants would be required to

draw any more widely applicable conclusions. In contrast to this, social constructionism regards meaning as socially, culturally and historically situated and would not aim to produce findings that have much wider application. Nevertheless, I hope that the findings may, possibly, shed some light on or inform the wider field.

Four themes were identified in the previous chapter. These were *Distrust*, *Disengagement*, *Political involvement* and *Moral voting*. The first two themes broadly discouraged participation in politics and voting whilst the latter two seemed to encourage it. As has already been explained a theme was a set of linked ideas that with other themes explained the body of data considered in the study and these could be composed of both individual codes and sub-themes. A sub-theme, on the other hand, was an idea within a theme that helped explain the theme and was usually formed by links between various codes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The theme *Distrust* suggested that the participants no longer trusted the voting and political system to work for them; to deliver what the participants wanted or expected. The theme incorporated a number of ideas that were expressed as sub-themes during the analysis. The first sub-theme in the code *Distrust* was the belief that both politicians and the political media were dishonest. Consequently, participants were not sure of whom to believe whilst also having the luxury of not having to accuse either politicians or the media of lying. The second sub-theme was a sense of a lack of *Relevance* because voting didn't make a difference to you. There were several elements to this. Either:

- nothing changes when you do vote; or
  - your vote never counts because you vote for a party that never wins in your area;
- or

- government often lacked the capacity to change anything anyway because so many things in life such as the price of petrol were outside of their control; and
- much of the work of government solely affects older people because they may have more of a stake in society and the participants were all between 18 and 24.

The third sub-theme was the idea that the participants were different from the political classes, who were perceived to be a relatively wealthy elite and that, to an extent, politics for most of the participants could be framed in terms of what the participants perceived themselves to be losing, particularly in terms of opportunities, money or other resources. The government was seen as something that cost them money and this was contrasted with the apparent wealth of politicians.

The second theme was simpler than the first and was referred to as *Disengagement*. The theme had two key ideas. The first idea was the sub-theme *Apathy* that suggested that the participants could not be bothered to vote. The central code in the sub-theme was linked to talk about very low usage of political media and very weak knowledge of politics. This suggests that through a lack of engagement some participants learn very little at all about politics and consequently have such very low levels of political knowledge that they would find voting based on preferences or differing potential benefits between political parties problematic (Carpini and Keeter, 1997; Popkin and Dimock, 1999). The second key idea is cultural; that abstaining from voting is a learned behaviour picked up through family not voting or engaging in politics.

The latter two themes, as has already been said, appeared to be encouraging voting. The first of these themes was referred to as *Political Involvement*. The central idea was that the participants were expressing in some manner that they were involved in politics. In a similar manner to the first theme, there were a number of ideas that fed into this central

theme. First, there was some *Pressure to vote*, or a push to vote, on the participants. There were various elements to this idea. There was some parental encouragement to vote and the participants also expressed some perceived benefits to voting, a few suggested that they were keen to vote because this was their *First opportunity* and some were beginning to tentatively explore the idea of *Party identification*. This became urgent or critical on occasions with some of the talk focusing on:

- the need for change;
- the differences between the what the political parties were offering suggesting that there was a choice to be made; and
- that a single vote might be the decisive vote in an election.

This *Pressure to vote* and the realisation that voting might be critical led to a deeper involvement in politics for some with conflicts expressed over the choice between low tax and weaker services or high tax and stronger services and an expression of emotional involvement in politics.

The final theme was *Moral voting*. This theme could have been regarded as a sub-theme to the prior theme *Political involvement* but was important enough to consider on its own. The theme was less complex than the prior theme *Political involvement* but did incorporate a number of important ideas. The first idea was that voting and participation in politics was related to a *National pride* principally in democracy and, to an extent, the UK's history of government. A particularly important element of this was the struggle for *Suffrage* and to protect democracy, both by women and those who fought against totalitarianism in world wars and whose sacrifices we ought to acknowledge by participating in politics. A number of further distinct ideas occurred. One was that voting was important because if we did not vote we could let extremists gain power. A second

idea was that we should vote to *Protect public services* and the final idea was that if we did not vote we then had no *Right to complain* about what government did.

This thesis so far has shown that a number of themes can be produced using social constructionist social psychology to investigate a political science question. The thesis now considers what use these themes could be.

The chapter is divided into a number of constituent parts. Eight explanations of propensity to vote were considered in chapters one and two. These explanations suggested that voters:

- had become more willing to take part in unconventional political activities such as protests to the detriment of their propensity to vote (Norris, 2002; Parry et al, 1992);
- had declining party identification (Clarke et al, 2004);
- suggested the importance of the general incentives and cognitive mobilisation model together (Clarke et al, 2004) and that the 18-24 cohort;
- had a changing sense of civic duty (ibid);
- lacked political knowledge and sophistication (Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Popkin and Dimock, 1999);
- had low levels of political efficacy (Balch, 1974; Clarke and Acock, 1989; Craig and Maggiotto, 1982; Good and Mayer, 1975; Morrell, 2003; Niemi et al, 1991);
- had little trust in politicians (Dalton, 1996; 1998; 2004; Klingemann, 1999; Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995) and that the attitude to voting might also relate to;
- processes of political socialisation (Niemi and Hepburn, 1995).

The chapter will begin by considering how these current explanations of propensity to vote explain the voting behaviour of the group of participants that took part in this study



and how each of the themes impacts upon and informs our understanding this. The chapter then goes on to consider how these themes might, possibly, inform our understanding of how these explanations of changes in propensity to vote work in wider society. I will also, where appropriate, provide some reflection on how the themes inform the explanations of changing propensity to vote and the methodology used.

A number of themes and sub-themes have links to several explanations of changes in voting behaviour. So, for instance, the theme *Politically involvement* cuts across and informs distinct ideas such as political efficacy, political knowledge political communication and media use. This is a consequence of the methodology used and will be discussed in detail in the next chapter but will be an important part of the focus of the reflection in this chapter.

Then, the chapter will discuss how the themes as whole explain the participant group's propensity to vote and how this might possibly shed some light on voting and propensity to vote in the wider population and will finally reflectively consider what has been achieved so far.

This further analysis of the themes in this chapter will allow consideration of how beneficial the use of social constructionist social psychology has been in the next chapter.

There is a caveat to this analysis. This relates to the relative strength of evidence for the codes and themes. Whilst well-evidenced themes allow some straightforward analysis, less well-evidenced themes present problems. There were a number of ideas such as party identification or increases in the availability of political information where, based on current political theory and the topic question used, we would have expected more talk. This is an issue because, as with all less well-evidenced events, it is not possible for any

research method to explain definitively why something did not occur. There are though a number of important possibilities:

- low occurrences of an themes or code could be a participant group issue: despite the measures taken, as detailed in chapter two, an atypical group of participants could have been chosen. This would not invalidate the pilot of the use of social constructionist social psychology but would suggest that any findings related to the topic investigated, electoral participation, be treated more cautiously;
- it could be a methodological issue. It could be that, as the interview transcripts were open to interpretation, that a group of responses were missed or that there was an issue with the questions used. This is important for this study because there were processes within this study of peer and member confirmation and reflection designed to highlight such issues and it consequently may suggest some limitations of the use of social constructionist social psychology in political science; or
- It could simply be that the participants did not use the code and theme and consequently, whilst considering the two points already made, it is sensible to speculate about what the absence or low use of a code or theme might mean. This is important because the processes through which some discourses are used rather than others and the change in language use over time have been a pivotal area of study with social constructionist social psychology for a period of time (see Foucault 1991, Rabinow, 1991).

## **4.2 - Themes deployed by Participants linked to the Turn to Non-electoral politics**

The first explanation of changes in voting behaviour discussed in chapter one was that there had been a turn to non-electoral politics and consequently young people were no longer voting. The point of departure for this idea is Inglehart's (1997; 2015) thesis that young people are developing a new post-materialistic culture, which is different from older generations. Inglehart suggested that there are significant changes afoot in modern western societies:

- there has been a steady rise in the material production of western economies such that there are very few people who are concerned with ensuring that they have enough to eat or fulfilling other material needs; and for similar reasons
- the majority of people in modern western societies have their technological and entertainment needs met; at the same time;
- there has been a steady rise in the levels of education; and
- an increase in the availability of information on a broad range of issues.

(Dalton, 2002, 2007; Nie et al, 1996; Norris, 2000; Prior, 2007)

The consequences of this are that:

- the extent of class-based conflict over access to resources has declined;
- established political elites and systems are being challenged; and
- there has been a rise in the importance of lifestyle issues, such as a concern for the environment and a belief in fair trade.

(Inglehart, 1997; 2015).

This has led to a move away from politics at the national level to a new cosmopolitan level as many of these lifestyle issues operate in the spaces between traditional Westphalian states (Held, 1987; 1996; 2006).

These processes are enabled and accentuated by certain characteristics of postmodern societies. An increasing proportion of our experiences is mediated. This allows our experiences to stretch into places that could not have previously been reached. An individual can watch the break-up of a glacier, caused by global warming, on their television, computer or mobile phone from their armchair or on a bus. At the same time, expert systems have developed that, effectively, limit the autonomy of the individual. An individual can only have authority over certain things with the right qualifications and position. This leads to a situation of asymmetric access and empowerment, with individuals able to gain knowledge in a broad range of areas, hitherto inaccessible, but not gain power within them (Giddens, 1990; 1991). This both creates the movement to lifestyle issues and challenges the present political system to accommodate this movement.

There are a number of consequences to attitudes towards voting claimed because of these processes. First, because of changes in the political norms of society, political activities that were once frowned upon have become much more acceptable. Second, at a local level, some political authorities are much more accommodating of different types of political activities than others. This leads to a situation where the government can no longer satisfy the demands of youth and in an effort to make their voices heard youth are turning to unconventional and non-electoral politics. This is accepted in some part of society but not in others leading to a situation where alternative politics is both supported and creates conflict (Norris, 2002; Parry et al, 1992).

This explanation of propensity to vote, in the participant group, could be usefully informed by the theme *Distrust*. The theme suggested that the participants no longer believed that the governments could deliver what they wished for and this resonates with but also adds to and suggests something different to the ideas in this explanation. First, there is clearly some sense of cultural difference particularly between the political classes and young people in the theme that echo the focus on culture of Inglehart (1997; 2015) but this cultural difference is not based on the idea that individuals live in a post-materialistic culture. Rather the opposite is true, that the young people who participated in the study if anything feels that they are relatively poverty stricken.

Similarly, in this explanation of voting, media and particularly new modern media, such as the internet, is seen as producing a wealth of new information regarding political ideas so that the voting populace should be well informed. Unfortunately, though, as a further consequence of the modern world young people are also aware that they do not have the expertise or position to intervene directly in these issues (Giddens, 1990; 1991). The theme *Distrust*, on the other hand, focuses on political media and suggests that although there might be greater access to it there are complex issues regarding trust affecting it. Put simply, the participants felt that either the media or politicians were not telling the truth and did not know who to believe. Consequently, there was a degree of uncertainty regarding political issues and information.

At the same time, there was a feeling that voting was wasted partly because the participants believed that nothing ever changed when they did vote. This could echo the views of Giddens (1990; 1991), that people do not feel that government are addressing areas of concern to them. A further contributory idea was that a number of participants

voted for a losing party in safe seats (Anderson, 2005). This suggests that abstention, rather than being an issue of modernity, it is a problem with democracy itself.

In contrast to those parts of this study that tended to agree with current explanations of changes in voting behaviour, there was little evidence that participants were turning to alternative forms of democracy. There was only one mention of this in the interviews. Two of the non-voting participants had taken part in protests to protect a local school. Consequently, it is difficult to suggest that that a turn to non-electoral politics amounted to a theme or a code.

There is a sense in which this explanation for changing attitudes towards politics has, in part, been taken over by events in society. The growing gap between rich and poor (Whittaker, 2013) in the UK has, perhaps, created a climate in which people no longer feel materially well off but rather regard themselves as economically deprived. Consequently, cultural differences may be becoming seen in terms of economics rather than ideals. The last ten years have also seen the growing levels of participation in protests slow noticeably (Bromley et al, 2004; Curtice and Ormston, 2015), despite the apparent idea, expressed in the theme, that voting did not achieve anything. Finally, the sensationalist tabloid press, the growth of competing but, perhaps, unreliable internet news sources and events such as the UK press phone hacking scandal of 2011, may have led to a decline in trust of the press (Loader, 2007; Wanta and Hu, 1994). It therefore, may be difficult for participants to see press reporting of political matters as straightforward and although media stories must have an effect on politics, this is, perhaps, affected by a lack of trust. It should, perhaps, come as no surprise that being involved in alternative politics is not linked to abstention. The explanation of changes to propensity to vote may have picked up on idea exemplified by the comedian Russell Brand in the UK 2015 general election,

who was clearly political but apparently alienated from the present political system, and declared in 2013 that he had never voted and never would, although later in that election changing his mind and claiming he would vote for the Labour party (Mason, 2015). It is plausible to suggest that there a range of individuals in similar positions but that they are not typical of individuals in the 18-24 cohort and in contrast to this it is also plausible to suggest that many people who are prepared to take part in alternative political action would also be reasonably likely to vote.

### **4.3 - Party Identification and the links to Participants' Themes**

The second explanation for changing propensity to vote in chapter one related to party identification. Party identification is the idea that voters have a psychological attachment to a particular political party, thus swaying their voting in favour of that party. In the party identification model, the likelihood of voting was seen as being determined by the intensity of attachment by individuals to a particular party. The more intense the feelings of attachment to a particular class, and consequently to a party, the greater the likelihood that that person would then subsequently vote (Butler and Stokes, 1974; Campbell et al, 1964).

The starting point for models of party identification was that individuals learnt to associate with the class of their parents from an early age through a process of political socialisation. Even if the household contained parents of different classes, it was likely that one would be more dominant within the family. Although other classes exist, most children would either be brought up in middle-class or working-class households. Subsequent choices by the family, over such matters as schooling, were likely to reflect this class nature. Hence, it was likely that middle-class parents would send their children to middle-class schools and working-class children would go to working class schools. This

would serve to reinforce the growing class identity of the child. Later life choices such as occupation, where to live and trade union membership would all be both influenced by and reinforce earlier life events such that individuals would often build up a very strong working class or middle-class identity. As they approached voting age, most people would then begin to identify with one party or another prior to any actual vote. Individuals that identify themselves as working class will also then tend to identify with the Labour party and, similarly, individuals that see themselves as middle class will tend to identify with the Conservative party (ibid).

Two processes then go into play. First, voters see policy announcements by either party through the lens of party identification and respond far more positively to policies from the political party they identify with. Second, at the time of an election the majority of voters rather than examining all issues or policies in detail tend to adopt a heuristic approach based on their party identification, automatically dismissing proposals from the other side and seeing proposals from the political party they identify with in a much better light. In those cases, where parents, for one reason or another, choose to vote against their own class the weight of other influences on the child tends to ensure that they still vote with their class (Budge et al, 1976; Denver, 2003).

Since the early 1970s, the levels of party identification in the UK populace and that of other major western democracies has been seen to decline (Dalton and Wattenburg, 2002; Heath, 2007). A significant number of voters appear to change their allegiance between elections. This is based on the idea, that rather than voters having an effective psychological attachment to a particular party, that voters make a more evaluative and cognitively based decision about which party is best for them (Achen, 2002; Fiorina, 1981; Franklin and Jackson 1983; Franklin 1984, 1992; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989).



This is a contested view with a range of other political scientist noting the increasingly more centrist but also the more ambiguous policy stances of both the main two UK political parties over the last two decades (Heffernan, 2011; Schofield, 2005) which may have caused confusion amongst voters and consequent difficulty identifying with one political party or another. The consequence of modern views of party identification and the parties', more centrist and arguably ambiguous stances is that, in the long term, individuals are likely to be more volatile in the way they vote resulting in a proportion of individuals switching parties between elections (Dalton and Wattenburg, 2002; Drummond, 2006; Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995).

There were elements of two themes, *Political involvement* and *Disengagement*, linked to this explanation of voting behaviour identified in the talk of participants. In the theme *Political involvement*, there were a number of sub-themes and codes that seemed to resonate with the notion of party identification but also to inform it. In the sub-theme *Pressure to vote* two codes were important. One code was *Party identification*. This was a discussion of identification with a political party; although in the study I noted that this idea seemed to be qualified and tentative. This is interesting because the available data suggests that party identification is in decline. In the 1964 general election, 85% of voters considered themselves very strong or fairly strong party identifiers (Clarke et al, 2004), by 2005 only 50% of voters considered themselves party identifiers (Sanders et al, 2005; Clarke et al, 2009). A further code within this sub-theme related to talk of *Parental encouragement to vote*. This was a reasonably strong code within theme with little ambiguity and lots of cases. One interesting point though was that it was disconnected from the idea of *Party identification*. There was little connection between the two and the push from parents seems to have been principally non-partisan. This could have been a

consequence of the age of the participants and it may well have been that a younger cohort of participants may have been clearer about an association between parental voting and their own voting intentions or alternatively it may be a reflection of the acknowledged decline in party identification since 1974 (Butler and Stokes, 1974). A further linked code, *Spatial voting*, was in the sub-theme *Critical vote*. This suggested that participants were seeing politics in terms of policy differences between parties and voting according to which party had the best policies for them at that time. This is consistent with current ideas on the increasingly volatility of the electorate (Clarke et al, 2009). This set of codes then broadly mirrored the idea of party identification but with noted differences particularly in the weakness of *Party identification* code and the lack of connection between it and *Parental encouragement to vote*.

A second theme, *Disengagement*, was also linked to the idea of party identification. An important element of this theme was the idea of parental encouragement to abstain from voting. This was the idea that there was a culture of not engaging in politics inculcated by some parents of the participants on their children. This is an important idea and it suggests that there is a culture within some households that encourages non-participation in politics. At the same time as some participants were inculcated into voting, others are inculcated into abstaining.

I think that there is a range of possible explanations for what this study has found in relation to this explanation of changes in voting behaviour. The most obvious response is that this perhaps was an unusual group of participants that reacted in an asynchronous manner. The study also used a specific age cohort and this may have affected its findings. The 18-24 may have not yet fully developed party identification. There is an argument suggesting that voting and political allegiance increases with age (Goerres, 2006;

Jennings, 1979; Stoker and Jennings 1995) and it is also a possibility that developments linked to party identification had already passed in earlier life and where consequently not discussed by the participants.

On the other hand, it is also possible that the ideas within the themes *Political involvement* and *Distrust* work in opposition to each other as perhaps two societal wide discourses shaping some to vote and some to abstain and that there is a disconnection between these ideas and the notion of party identification. The themes and the elements of them related to party identification certainly suggest new research avenues and opportunities to explore and, therefore, could highlight some benefits of using social constructive social psychology within political science.

#### **4.4 - Participants Themes and Rational Choice Explanations**

The third explanation of changes in propensity to vote from chapter one related to two rational choice derived models: the general incentives model (Whiteley and Seyd, 1994; 2002) and the cognitive mobilisation model (Dalton, 2002, 2007; Nie et al, 1996).

Rational choice explanations suggest that voters would rationally weigh up the costs and benefits of voting in an election. The key point in original rational choice models was that the low chance that a single vote might be decisive and the low benefits, as most people benefit from the government whether they vote or not, acts as a disincentive to electoral participation (Downs, 1957; Riker and Ordeshook, 1968). In contrast to this approach, the later models examined here do not consider the likelihood of a single vote being decisive at all: they have dropped the variable (Dalton, 2002, 2007; Nie et al, 1996; Pattie et al, 2003) principally because of a number of studies suggesting that individuals do not calculate to this degree (Tversky and Kahnemann, 1992; Quattrone and Tversky, 1988).

Consequently, modern versions focus on determining how the benefits of voting might outweigh the costs.

The general incentive model stemmed from a consideration of the question of why some individuals were extremely active in politics whilst others were not. The key methodological point of this model was that consideration of individuals that took part in several political activities was likely to be more insightful, as this involved greater costs to the individual, in comparison to singular activities such as voting. Whiteley and Seyd (1994; 2002) determined that for those individuals heavily involved in politics there must be some extra incentive to do so. These individuals by definition tend to be involved in local and national political organisations. The benefits, according to Whiteley and Seyd (ibid), are psychological benefits from helping out the group and from being part of the political system. These accrue on top of the normal benefits from voting, the benefits from feeling that your voice is heard and the social norms at work: the expectations that an individual will or will not vote. The psychological benefits can be regarded, alongside those benefits accruing from being part of the political system, as constituting an individual's sense of civic duty. In Whiteley and Seyd's model (ibid), these are formulated alongside orthodox elements of rational choice models, such as costs and political efficacy, to explain attitudes to voting. Whiteley and Seyd (ibid) extended the scope of the model realising that, to some extent, these factors will affect a range of individuals not just those highly active in politics because many people feel that voting is about helping individuals that we perceive as being in some way similar to ourselves, even if we are not part of a formal group (ibid). Interestingly, the model could explain why some people do not vote, as well, because non-voters may belong to a group that give incentives for non-participation by encouraging involvement in alternative activities.

The cognitive mobilisation model is connected to the idea of political knowledge that I will discuss further, later in this chapter. The key question this model asks is what are the effects of modernity on the information processing capacity of individuals and how does this affect their political behaviour. The first point made is that an increasing proportion of the population now receive a higher level of education. In 1950, 3.4% of the UK population had attended a UK higher education institution, by 2000 this had increased to 33% (Bolton, 2012). This increase in education should increase individual's capacity to deal with political knowledge (Dalton, 2002, 2007; Nie et al, 1996). In the last thirty years, the sources of political information have also increased dramatically. The number of internet and television based sources of political information has grown considerably, alongside the quantity of information these sources now make available (Norris, 2000; Prior, 2007). This should reduce the costs associated with gaining political information. The consequences of this cheaper information and increased capacity to deal with it are unclear, though. According to these models, there are two possibilities, either the extra availability of knowledge increases voter dissatisfaction with incumbent parties, leading to increasing propensity to vote, but in protest, or it leads to a sense of alienation regarding politics and a decline in the propensity to vote (Clarke et al, 2004).

These two models had been linked to the decline in overall turnout in recent elections when taken together, if not explaining either the decline individually or the specific decline in the attitudes to voting of the 18-24 cohort. They are the leading rational choice derived models of voting behaviour (ibid).

There were a number of themes, subthemes and codes identified in the study that related to these models. There were also a number of areas that it was felt that participants would comment on, which did not occur. It was difficult to see many

participant comments related to expressing oneself. Several participants did use a code that was referred to as *Right to complain*, but this does not fully encompass the idea of expressing yourself politically. There were no comments regarding increasing access to information or education increasing the ability to vote. This was surprising. It was also surprising that none of the participants discussed issues such as the cost of voting. This perhaps suggests that this was not important to them. These omissions could be a result of general problems within the study that have already been discussed. However, it could also suggest a limitation on the use of social constructionist social psychology as a methodology. It is possible that these areas were not discussed by participants because they were not aware of and consequently did not talk about such issues as, for instance, the effects that education would have on voting. This is, perhaps, hardly surprising as the omissions involve theoretical concepts and are therefore unlikely to occur in everyday talk or necessarily be highlighted by a broadly inductive methodology (Burr, 2003; 2015).

There were elements of two themes mentioned related to this explanation of changing propensity to vote. Elements of the theme *Political involvement* were related directly to the explanation. Participants discussed related issues within three of the codes that constituted the theme: *Personal benefit*, *Spatial Voting* and *Critical vote*. First, in the code *Personal benefit*, as the name suggests, there is the idea that there is some benefit to voting. There is little though to suggest that the participants are coldly calculating the extent of that benefit. Then, perhaps more in line with rational choice models, the code *Spatial voting* suggests that voters compare the available policy options of different parties and choose the option that favours them the most. Then, in contrast to modern rational choice models, the code *Critical vote* suggests that voters might believe that a single vote could be decisive in an election. Whilst not consistent with any rational choice

models, this does concur though with the work of Tversky and Kahnemann, (1992) and Quattrone and Tversky (1988), mentioned in the previous chapter. These behavioural economists have shown that individuals routinely overestimate the chances of unlikely events occurring. They have shown that people gamble knowing that the chances of winning are low because they believe, despite this knowledge, that they can still do much better than chance suggests.

Within the theme *Distrust*, the code *Personal losses* was also linked to this explanation of changing propensity to vote. Importantly, this code was linked to the sub-theme *Wealth and difference* rather than the sub-theme *Critical vote* or the code *Personal benefit* and the theory would have suggested that this would be the case. The code suggests that the participants believe that government cost them financially and it is related to, and in contrast to, the apparent wealth of the political classes and, consequently, not a matter of cold rational calculation.

I have a number of reflections on this group of results. The themes suggest, in line with a range of academic thought on the matter, that perhaps the rational choice models are overstated (Tversky and Kahnemann, 1992; Quattrone and Tversky, 1988); that individuals are not as rational or calculating as the models envisage and are motivated by different factors. The interesting thing rather, from the talk of the participants, is the manner in which their talk and the consequent themes, sub-themes and codes which are derived from it are complex, convoluted and contradictory. They suggest a social world which is inhabited by individuals that hold multiple perspectives on matters rather than them being straightforward coldly calculating monolithic selves.

There is also an element of incommensurability, though, here, between what is being looked for, models of rational participation and the multiple perspectives of participants

talk. Modelling as a research method is often normative: it considers what people should do rather than what people actually do. In the case of rational point explanations, a modeller might argue that people are more rational than not and would, therefore, justify the assumption of rationality. Consequently, it is perhaps not surprising that the themes differ somewhat from the models. What perhaps the methodology has shown here is possible avenues from which better models could be envisaged.

#### **4.5 - Participants' Themes Highlighting Voter's Sense of Civic Duty**

The idea of civic duty is a central component of both classical and modern republicanism. In classical Greek democracy, citizens were expected to take a full part in both the praxis and decision-making process of government. They constituted the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government and were expected to lead a public life engaged with the rest of the political community. This was their civic duty (Held, 1987; 1996; 2006; Pettit, 1999; Skinner, 1998).

A broad range of what might be referred to as republican thought now espouses the view that participation in public life is essential for the good of democratic rule. This includes participatory democrats, deliberative democrats and republican theorists (Barber, 2001; Cohen, 1991; Holden, 1978; 1988; 1993; Luskin et al, 2002; MacPherson, 1977; Pettit, 1999; Skinner, 1998).

There have been a number of important pieces of research connected with civic duty. An influential finding suggests that the level of education that an individual receives is linked to their levels of participation in civic life: those who receive some form of higher education being much more likely to participate than those who do not (Almond & Verba, 1963). Other writers focus increasingly on resources, notably the social and political skills,



time and money required to be effective in public life and perform your civic duty.

Through gaining greater skills and capacities, through education, individuals are seen to be more likely to engage with civil society. Individuals, through education, increase life chances and, in particular, job prospects and these are seen to correlate with the development of other skills but also to provide the capacity in terms of finances and free time to engage with the political arena (Brady et al, 1995; Schlozman et al, 1995, Almond and Verba, 1963; Verba and Nie, 1987).

The resources that an individual has been increasingly framed within the concept of social capital: those that participate in other forms of social activity and hence gain civic culture are much more likely to participate in the political arena and perform their civic duty. The decline in certain forms of social activity is seen as a good predictor of the aggregate decline in political participation (Putnam, 1995, 2000). A number of theories explaining the change in attitudes to voting, such as rational choice models (Downs, 1957; Riker and Ordeshook, 1968), incorporate civic duty as an extrinsic motivational factor affecting attitudes to voting.

One of the themes identified in chapter three, *Moral voting*, mirrors the idea of civic duty, very clearly. First, the code *Suffrage*, which reflected the struggle for voting rights by women in the UK, and the sub-theme *National pride*, recognising the broader struggle for democratic rights by people through wars and other conflicts, suggested the idea of a right of participation in civil society and government that had been hard won, or protected, through the sacrifice of individuals. These codes suggest participants who believe in the importance of political life. Second, through the codes that individually fed into the *Moral voting* theme, *Prevent extremism*, *Protect public services* and *Right to complain*, suggesting a participant that is shaping to participate in public life. They

suggest a participant that sees abstaining from voting as leading to wider consequences, such as letting extremist parties gain some measure of power or important public services being lost. They suggest that if you do not vote you lose a right to complain and have to live with the consequences of not voting. The theme is, consequently, highlighting that republican sense of virtue and civic duty that was central to original democratic ideals (Held, 1987; 1996; 2006).

The other side of civic duty is the social capital model (Verba et al, 1995) which suggests that those with greater resources were more likely to participate in civic life. There was little evidence of this identified from participants' talk. Where the participants discussed resources in terms of either wealth or knowledge it was often related to either a problem believing knowledge gained through the media as in the sub-theme *Dishonesty* or poverty, as in the sub-theme *Wealth and difference*. This suggests that the capacity to take part in civic life in these participants was yet to fully develop and, it could be that, as the participants mature and gain experience they would begin to gain the resources to and talk more about engaging in civic life.

It could be argued that much of what methodology identified is to be expected. The methodology identified a range of ideas in the participants' talk which linked together within one theme that follows a tradition of political thought that started in Ancient Greece and is still important today (Held, 1987; 1996; 2006). It would have been perhaps more surprising if it did not pick up or link these ideas. Interestingly, the methodology picked up little on resources or social capital and, as has already been suggested, I suspect that this is because of the age range of the participants. Older participants would have had longer to develop social and political capital required to engage in civil society (Brady et al, 1995; Schlozman et al, 1995, Almond and Verba, 1963; Verba and Nie, 1987). This

suggests two points. First, that the methodology has performed well or at least as well as existing methodologies. Second that the study has painted an interesting picture of what a small group of participants understand by civic duty and added, in some small way, to our overall understanding of the concept.

#### **4.6 - Participants' Themes regarding Political Knowledge**

The fifth explanation of changes in propensity to vote related to political knowledge.

Political knowledge is important because a number of explanations related to political behaviour and attitudes to voting, such as rational choice theories (see Downs, 1957; Riker and Ordeshook, 1968) rely on the notion that individuals have a good, if not perfect, knowledge of politics, on which to make their decisions.

This is a broadly contested point in political science. There has been a historical and enduring, normative debate regarding what the levels of political knowledge of ordinary people should be. It is closely connected to two broad brush approaches to political participation discussed in chapter one. What is often referred to as Liberal or minimalist democracy has largely advocated a limited democratic role for ordinary citizens: citizens having a right to be apathetic about politics with the majority of citizens only participating in elections if they felt threatened. This is predicated on the idea that ordinary citizens would choose to know little about politics because they have other interests and prefer to let others deal with the political sphere in their stead (Berlin, 2002; Hinchman and Hinchman, 1994; Jones, 1954; Schumpeter, 1987).

In contrast to this, what could be referred to as the republican position has always made a claim for the need for full political participation. This claim has been, to an extent, contingent on the presumption that there needs to be greater sharing of knowledge

between the political and private spheres (Barber, 2001; Cohen, 1997; Holden, 1974; 1988; 1993; MacPherson, 1977; Pettit, 1999; Skinner, 1998). The approach, therefore, argues for greater, if not perfect, political knowledge.

The empirically determined consequences of weak political knowledge are that voters tend to make decisions based on the personality of politicians rather than policies and that below a certain level of knowledge turnout declines dramatically because individuals have insufficient knowledge to cast a vote. This picture is more complex when examined in detail because some voters have more knowledge in areas of particular concern to themselves, whilst others have a wide base of political knowledge and voters use a variety of heuristics, such as party identification, to compensate for a lack of knowledge (Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Popkin and Dimock, 1999). Consequently, levels of apparent political knowledge can be deceptive.

The question of political knowledge in the UK is even more problematic because there is a lack of research into the consequences of low levels of political knowledge within the UK (Heath et al, 2002). Many UK studies such as Andersen et al (2002; 2005) focus on the link between political knowledge and which political party individuals vote for, rather than their attitudes to voting. Political knowledge is a feature of the British Election Survey and as such a number of researchers have commented on political knowledge but these have seen political knowledge only as a component part of larger models (see Clarke et al, 2004; 2009; Sanders et al, 2005). There is no research specifically into levels of political knowledge in the 18-24 year-old cohort and consequently, it is not possible to consider whether levels of political knowledge in the UK, in this cohort, have fallen alongside their propensity to vote. Research into political knowledge is dominated by work from the USA (Heath et al, 2002; see for instance Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Krosnick, 1999; Popkin and

Dimock, 1999; Zaller and Feldman, 1992; Zaller, 1992). The American studies and the few British studies (Heath and Tilley, 2003) suggest that levels of political knowledge may have slightly declined in the post-war period, despite increases in levels of education and significant increases in sources of political information as suggested earlier in the chapter with reference to the cognitive mobilisation model (Bennett and Bennett, 1989; Bennett and Barber, 1980; Neuman, 1986; Norris, 2000; Prior, 2007; Smith, 1989).

There were elements of three themes, identified in chapter three, that were relevant to this explanation of the change in propensity to vote. The first of these was the sub-theme *Apathy* in the theme *Disengagement*. The sub-theme suggests that the participants deploying it had little political knowledge and, linked to this, had very low political media usage. This was connected to a central code which was referred to as *Apathy* in which the participants claimed that they could not be bothered with politics. The sub-theme demonstrates a link, in the participants, between low political media usage, weak political knowledge and apathy. This is consistent with, but also adds, in some small way, to the findings of a number of studies showing a correlation between political media use and electoral participation (see Livingstone and Markham, 2008, O'Neill, 2009).

A second element was the sub-theme *Dishonesty* which was part of the theme *Distrust*. The participants that deployed this sub-theme were unsure of the veracity of the political knowledge that they had gained. The sub-theme was made up of two codes, *Dishonest politicians* and *Dishonest Media*. Participants felt that either the media or politicians were not telling the truth in a number of cases. Although participants found it very hard to work out which of the two were not telling the truth, it was apparent that this caused them to doubt the knowledge that they had on certain political matters. This suggests a

strong link between efficacy, media and knowledge which I will discuss further later in the chapter

A final element occurred as the sub-theme, *Developed understanding*, in the theme engaged. The sub-theme was composed of two codes, *Empathy* and *Taxes Vs services*, that, and in contrast to the prior two points, showed that participants had engaged with and gained more than a superficial knowledge of politics. This was part of a broader idea within the theme of participants engaging in politics.

The thematic analysis demonstrated three broad ideas related to political knowledge shaping the manner in which participants engage with the political arena. On one hand, the apathy towards politics and knowledge of politics could be part of disengagement with the political. Alongside this, elements of distrust of political knowledge produced scepticism of the knowledge that was available. Both of these sub-themes tend to shape participants away from politics and voting. On the other hand, there were participants prepared to engage and show a deeper knowledge of politics which tend to shape them towards voting. I personally think that this is one of the most interesting results, methodologically, so far. There are a number of interesting and unusual connections being made. First, between apathy, weak political knowledge and low political media use and then between political efficacy and political knowledge. This shows that one of the important benefits of the methodology is that connections can be made between ideas and, to an extent; the link between ideas can be explored through the talk of participants. The reasons for the connections being made in the first place was the connections were apparent in the talk of the participants either because the participants were repeatedly making the link or the link followed from the manner in which they were talking about the ideas. There are, perhaps, two processes that I undertook to develop these links. The

links were a component of the themes and sub-themes identified in the study. The themes were identified partly through examining what participants had said and partly by considering how what they had said logically fitted together. When I reflected on this I realised that the connections between ideas were therefore broadly inductive but I, of course, have had a long experience of dealing with these theories and concepts and this would have impacted upon the connections that I saw. I think that I probably made connections in areas that I was more familiar with and I would have, obviously, been less able to recognise or connect with concepts that I was less familiar with. The coding was peer and member checked, but of course, peer checking was by people familiar with my work and working in political science and, consequently, I think this process would have, probably, been far more likely to agree with a political science based connection as opposed to, for instance, a sociologically based connection. The participant or member checks happened after later interviews. I talked through what my findings or conclusions were up to that point with participants. Whilst this was a genuine attempt to improve and check the quality of coding and subsequent analysis and participants made improvements to coding and helped verify a few links, they did not suggest alternative connections. This was not their role. This suggests that the quality processes within the study whilst ensuring that findings were warranted may not have ensured that all connections were identified. Therefore, the methodology did link up concepts well but I treat this cautiously as there may have been alternative and possibly better connections available.

#### **4.7 - Participants' Themes Reporting the Effects of Political Socialisation on**

##### **Attitudes to Voting**

Some of the most interesting themes used by the participants in this study were linked to the processes by which the participants learnt their attitudes towards voting. This is a

part of political socialisation. Political socialisation is the process by which individuals learn the political attitudes that will, to an extent, determine their political behaviour in later life. This was the sixth explanation of changes in propensity to vote discussed in chapter one. It is an explanation of political behaviour that was prominent in the 1960s and 1970s but has recently had renewed interest in it because of advances in the field (Niemi and Hepburn, 1995).

Political socialisation can be thought of from two perspectives. First, it can be thought of from a functionalist point of view: political socialisation being the process by which young people are politically educated such that they can take part in political life (Easton, 1975; 1979; Dawson et al, 1977; Kavanagh, 1972). This itself can be seen as both a positive and a negative process: it is either the process by which political society reproduces itself or Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony: the idea that the state and its structures can bias the population towards maintenance of the status quo (Gramsci; 1971, Laclau and Mouffe; 2001, Mouffe; 1979). Second, it can be thought of as a psychological process; that learning about politics is a question of learning and progressing through broadly defined stages. The psychologies of Kohlberg and Piaget (Dawson et al, 1977; Kohlberg, 1982; 1983; Piaget, 1937; 1952) have had a particular influence on this perspective.

The first of these perspectives: that of political socialisation as the process by which the political system is able to reproduce itself is associated particularly with Easton and Dennis (1967; 1969). Easton and Dennis were interested in the reasons why political systems endure. They studied young schoolchildren and thought that they could see a process of political socialisation at work. First, children begin to realise that there is a greater authority than their parents: they become aware of the police, for instance. Then, they become aware of significant political figures such as the Prime Minister; these are



seen as ideals, representing certain positive behaviours. These associations with political figures are then slowly incorporated into an idea of the political. In the alternative Gramscian model of political socialisation, a similar process occurs, but, in this case, the question is how does the capitalist political system reproduce itself and stop individuals developing revolutionary ideas. The focus, in this model, is on how the state uses propaganda such as flags, anthems, and intellectual and moral leadership to keep people supporting it and how it encourages blame for the faults of the political system to be put on other countries or minority ethnic groups (Davidson, 1977; Dawson et al, 1977, Femia, 1981). These processes are seen to occur in stages. In early childhood the individual gains some very broad and generalised ideas about politics, as the individual moves into late childhood and adolescence, these ideas and attitudes become more focused and specific until the individual reaches adulthood as a fully functioning political individual (Weissberg, 1974).

The second perspective was that of the psychological. Piaget's contribution focused on the various cognitive stages that the child went through on their journey to adulthood. As the child progresses through these stages they construct an ever more realistic image of reality (Lovell, 1959; Phillips; 1981). This was further developed by Kohlberg who thought that individuals went through six stages of moral development. This started off at an initial stage where children do not understand the idea of right and wrong but comply with instructions to avoid being punished. Children go through a number of further stages but may eventually reach the point where they understand broad societal ethical issues and can come to reasoned judgements regarding them (Kohlberg, 1982; 1983). At some point in this process, they would become politically able and active.

There have been four important questions within the field of political socialisation. The first of these focused on the extent to which the process of political socialisation was innate: whether it comes from within the individual or is determined by social factors influencing individual development, such as learning about politics and the process of political socialisation from your parents (Hyman, 1969). A second question focused on determining the points at which the process of political socialisation started and finished. The conclusions of a number of studies have suggested that political socialisation begins very early in life but tends to complete in early adulthood, after passing through the distinct stages mentioned earlier (Easton and Dennis, 1969; Kavanagh, 1983). A third question presumed that political socialisation was caused by external factors and then focused on determining the main source of political socialisation from these factors. The majority of authors considering (see Easton and Dennis, 1967; 1969; Greenstein, 1965, Hess et al, 2005) parents as being particularly important in the process of political socialisation but Becker et al (1975) suggests that the media may play a significant part. The fourth question focused on a desire to find evidence of an actual link between early apparent party identification and actual adult voting behaviour (Niemi and Hepburn, 1995).

There were three important codes related to political socialisation, identified in the last chapter. First, in the theme *Political involvement* and the sub-theme *Pressure to vote*, there were two codes, *Party identification* and *Parental encouragement*. The history of research into political socialisation and party identification suggests a focus on who people vote for rather than propensity to vote (see Niemi and Hepburn, 1995). Parents tended to encourage children to vote for a particular party. These two codes are interesting in particular because, as has already been mentioned, the code *Parental*

*encouragement* was quite distinct from the code *Party identification*. When the former was deployed there was rarely any connection to the latter rather it was just encouragement to vote. In addition to this, the code *Party identification* was used quite weakly; participants were usually very tentative in its use. They tended to qualify the party identification and it was usually reported as something that their parents had said

Second, there is an interesting code in the theme *Disengagement, Negative parental influence*. This is best understood by the idea that individuals learn a set of negative values and ideas regarding political participation from their parents which encourages, a non-political culture that stops them learning about politics and encourages them to be apathetic towards voting. The longer term consequence is that they then abstain from voting because they do not know anything about political parties, the issues involved or the processes. These ideas could possibly shed some light on the change in attitudes to voting in the 18-24 cohort and they will be discussed further later. My reflections on this are of course that methodologically, it is difficult to consider that the results have meaning past the quite specific culture and historical point of the participant group but nevertheless, this suggests something, possibly, interesting and worth exploring further about a range of findings related to propensity to vote.

My thoughts on these findings were also focused on the similarity between the coding and thematic analysis with this explanation of propensity to vote and that for the party identification. Both explanations were linked to the same codes. This was not the only example of this in the study. There are a number of examples where this notable similarity between coding and thematic analysis of one explanation of propensity to vote and another occurred. There is a possibility that disparate concepts, connected to propensity to vote, such as political trust, political knowledge and personal efficacy are

more closely intertwined than we presently consider and, perhaps, they are just separate sides of the same coin.

#### **4.8 - Participants' Themes highlighting how Efficacy regarding Politics affects Attitudes to Voting**

Efficacy is an individual's belief in their own abilities or capacities to perform in a particular arena. Political efficacy focuses on belief in the political arena. Political efficacy is a psychological characteristic. The origins of the idea come from Bandura's (1977; 1982; 1993; 1994) notion of self-efficacy and social learning theory. Efficacy acted as a missing link explaining why individuals, with the same abilities, performed differently at the same tasks (Schwartz and Gottman, 1976). Beliefs regarding efficacy relate to specific spheres of human action (Pond and Hay, 1989). Consequently, a belief in political efficacy may bear no relation to belief in workplace efficacy or any other form of efficacy.

Efficacy, according to Bandura, is believed to stem from four processes:

- an individual can succeed in an area and recognition of that personal success can further a sense of efficacy;
- an individual can gain efficacy through observing the performance of others that can be compared to themselves;
- an individual can be persuaded by others to change their levels of personal efficacy; and
- in certain situations, an individual can get physiological responses that can be broadly referred to as nervousness that can adversely affect efficacy.(1994)

The notion of efficacy in political science has long had a further complication. There is an individual's belief in their own abilities but this then can be compounded by the ability of

the political system to respond to their wishes or needs. These two aspects of political efficacy are referred to as internal and external efficacy respectively. Research in this area in the UK suggests that levels of political efficacy have changed little in the last few decades (Clarke et al, 2004; Pattie and Johnston, 1998) and that young people have much higher levels of political efficacy than older individuals (Bromley et al, 2004).

Within this study, a number of codes and themes were connected to the idea of efficacy. Within the theme *Distrust* one of the sub-themes that I have already discussed, *Dishonesty*, was particularly relevant to the idea of internal efficacy. Participants deploying this sub-theme were suggesting that they thought either politicians or the media were lying and did not trust the information that they received from politicians through mediated sources

This was an unexpected sub-theme because although there is a significant body of literature examining issues of credibility and trust in the media (see for instance Gaziano and McGrath, 1986; Newhagan and Nass, 1988; Wanta and Hu, 1994; West, 1994), work to date in this field has focused on quantitative survey work to assess factors influencing the audience's belief in the credibility of the media. There is little qualitative work in this area particularly related to politics or propensity to vote. There have been similar, but interestingly different, findings to this study previously in the field of political efficacy. Austin and Pinkletons' (1995) work, cited in chapter one, *Positive and Negative Effects of Political Disaffection on the Less Experienced Voter* and a number of follow-up pieces by Pinkleton (1998) and Pinkleton and Austin (2001) suggested that voting in first time voters was associated with an individual's perception of their ability to see the truth in what politicians were saying when the politician was acting through the media. This is in direct contrast to this study's results in that it is clear that the sub-theme related to

participants' belief in their ability to see through to the truth of what the media were saying, not just what politicians were saying in the media. This is important because it suggests a further layer of complexity in what we were expecting the participants in this study to do when they vote. First, the individual feels they have to allow for any distortions to what politicians are saying because their message is mediated then, second, they have to consider the veracity of what politicians were saying in the first place.

Alongside this sub-theme, the theme *Distrust* contained another important idea, the sub-theme *Relevance*. This sub-theme resonated well with the idea of external efficacy. The sub-theme contained three important codes. The first was the idea of the *Wasted vote* there were two aspects to this. A vote could be wasted because the participants felt that nothing would happen as a consequence of voting and that they were voting for a losing candidate in a safe seat and consequently their voices were not heard. Another code suggested that government simply lacked the capacity to deal with many problems that affected them and the third code in the sub-theme suggested that the issues government dealt with tended to be of importance to older people rather than the age cohort in the study. The consequence of this sub-theme was that participants using it felt that government lacked the ability to deal with their issues: they had low external efficacy.

These two sub-themes were in contrast, though with a further sub-theme, *Critical vote*. This sub-theme was composed of two codes *Make a difference* and *Spatial voting* and the eponymous central code. The broad thrust of this sub-theme was that not only does voting make a difference: that was the rationale for why some participants were voting, but a single vote could be decisive. It could be the critical vote that determined who won or lost an election. Participants deploying this sub-theme then clearly believed in their own efficacy and that of the system.

The themes suggest a number of important points about efficacy in the participant group. It is apparent that efficacy is more important than the actual very limited chance of a person's vote being decisive. If an individual believes in the ability of the system to respond they tend to participate. The idea of efficacy is, therefore, critical in determining whether or not the participants voted. Efficacy also seems to be crucially linked to ideas such as political knowledge. The present lack of change in political efficacy (Clarke et al, 2004; Pattie and Johnston, 1998) could possibly be being masked as a change in political knowledge in which, as I have already mentioned in this chapter, we have little research on with regards to the 18-24 cohort in the UK.

#### **4.9 – Themes highlighting Political Trust**

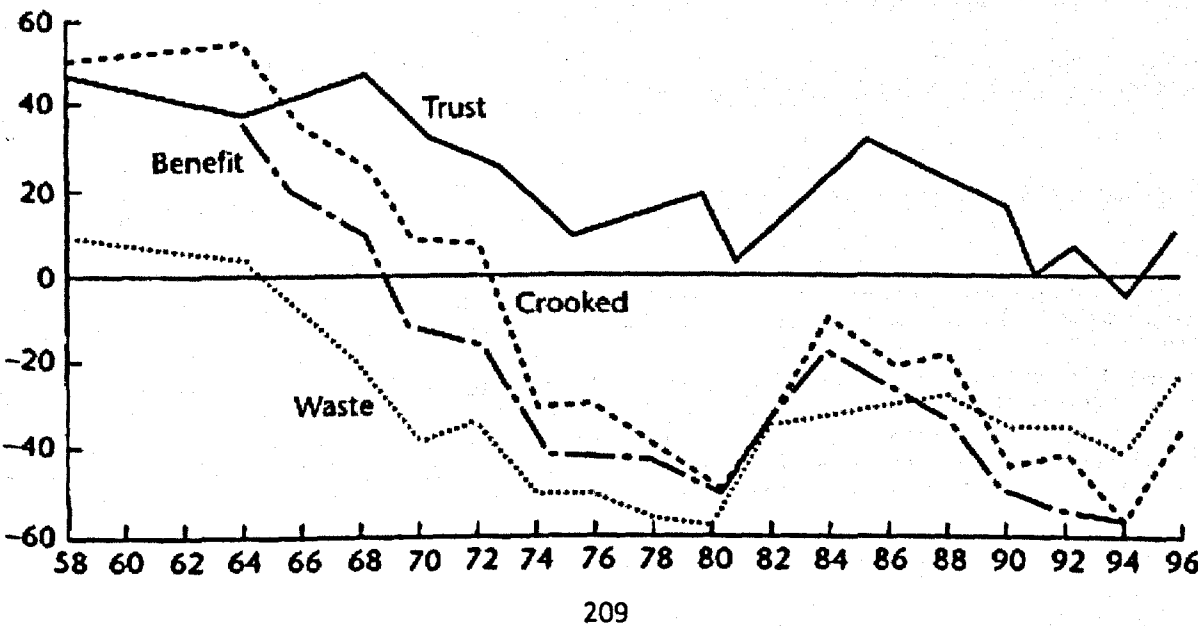
The eighth explanation of changing voting behaviour discussed in chapter one was the idea of political trust. This is a concept derived from Easton's work (1975; 1979) on political systems. Political trust is a concept closely linked to the notion of political support: the concept of political support (Almond and Verba, 1963; Easton, 1975) was formulated in the 1960s from the findings of a range of survey research pointing to the downturn in support for politics. The concept was comprised of the ideas of political trust and political legitimacy: an acceptance that the authoritative body rightfully exercised power and the belief in its ability to do so (Manin et al, 1974).

Trust, according to Easton, was seen to operate in various political domains. One could trust politicians, have trust in political systems, such as democracy, or trust the political community: your fellow citizens (1975; 1979). Norris has suggested that this categorisation of trust could equally be seen as one of the principles, performance and institutions of a regime (1999a). Trust, or, at least, its opposite, distrust was seen to be linked to other political science concepts. A broad and enduring sense of distrust of the

political community and its institutions can develop into alienation (Citrin, 1974; Easton, 1975; 1979).

The major finding from work on political trust is that there are an increasing number of people, across the globe that, whilst still strongly supporting democracy, have increasing concerns about the performance of politicians. The main elements of these studies that correlate with the decline in levels of electoral participation are range of operationalized ideas based around the concept of political support (See Chart 4.1 below) including a belief that politicians are crooked, waste resources and are in politics for their benefit rather than ours. Support and trust for politicians have declined significantly since the end of the Second World War despite a small resurgence in the 1980's. The present change in attitudes to voting can be seen to parallel the decline in levels of political trust and support (Dalton, 1996; 1998; Klingemann, 1999; Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995). This suggests that the present issues with declining attitudes to voting are connected to the widespread distrust of politicians.

Chart 4.1 Declining Support for Politicians 1958 -1996





There are thought to be a number of reasons for this decline in political trust:

- first, long-term, poor, or weak, economic performance, over sustained periods, in a number of countries, has eroded confidence in democratic regimes (McAllister, 1999);
- second, the process of elections has created both individuals that see themselves as winners and that see themselves as losers and those citizens that see themselves as losers trust government less (Anderson, 2005; Norris, 1999b); and
- third, according to Inglehart (1997; 2015), the broad shift towards a post-materialistic value system, discussed earlier in the chapter, has tended to erode support for government, whilst increasing support for democracy.

This explanation of changes in voting behaviour was so important within the participants' talk that one theme, *Distrust*, was entirely focused on it. The theme, which also related to a number of the other ideas that have already been explored in the chapter, was composed of three ideas. These were that information regarding politics could not be trusted, that there was a sense of a lack of relevance in the participants and that the political classes were somehow different from them in terms of upbringing and life chances and that these had led to both the feeling that politics did not do what people wanted and the lack of trust in politics.

This theme resonates well with academic work on political trust but differs in some key respects. First, as has already been commented on, post-materialistic culture is not apparent and does not appear to be a reason for the decline in political trust. Second, although there were certainly some comments in the code *Dishonest politicians*, particularly related to the expenses scandal of 2011 (Pattie and Johnston, 2012; Renwick

et al, 2011) that could be considered as evidence of feelings of corruption in politicians, these were relatively isolated examples. It was apparent that, aside from the expenses scandal, most participants felt that politicians in the UK were, on the whole, not corrupt. This is consistent with research on the matter which suggests that the UK has both low levels of corruption and that the corruption that is present is underestimated (Transparency International UK, 2011). Therefore, whilst corruption is a significant factor in changes in political trust globally, it is not so important in the UK, and this is mirrored in this study. Third, there was a suggestion that politicians were not so much in politics for their own benefit but rather just wealthy in their own right. The focus of the sub-theme *Wealth and difference* suggested that politicians were effectively perpetuating an unfair system that they may have already gained from rather than gaining in the present.

#### **4.10 - Exploring the Participants' Attitudes to Voting: The Effects of the Themes as a Whole**

How the four themes are constituted has been explored in the prior chapter and, so far, in this chapter how they affect the existing explanations of changing voting behaviour has been examined. The chapter will now then consider how the themes as a whole explain the participants' attitudes to voting. The key point is that the talk that participants use shapes their behaviour regarding the topic of their talk.

As has already been said, two of the themes would tend to discourage voting and two of the themes would tend to encourage voting. The themes *Distrust* and *Disengagement* tended to discourage voting but they appeared to act in different ways and to different effects. The theme *Disengagement* seemed to reflect quite a withdrawal from political life that was passed down in families. Participants using this seemed to be unlikely to ever vote. There was a sense that, because they had so little political knowledge they would be

incapable of establishing a preference between political parties and to change the present situation would require significant effort as the weakness in their political knowledge was so profound.

There was little overlap between the first theme *Disengagement* and the second theme discouraging voting, *Distrust*. The rationale for theme *Disengagement* seemed to be *Negative parental influence or Apathy*. In the case of the theme *Distrust*, there were signs of engagement in the political system, even if the participants were not happy with what they found. This theme suggested that participants were very unhappy with both society and political system. They felt that politics did not resolve their issues, that the truth was not being told and this was to an extent to protect differences of class and wealth in society. This theme suggests a group that, to a degree, have been left out of society and feel powerless about it. It seemed a very strong theme in the participant group because it was well used, well-articulated and quite complex. This suggests, perhaps, that these issues were more common in the participant cohort than in other societal groups. One important point is that there might an intersection in young people between poverty if we discount relying on the wealth of family and a lack of relevance in politics and disenfranchisement, because politics does not often address the concerns of youth because they tend not to vote.

The two themes encouraging voting, *Moral voting* and *Political involvement* had more overlap. The theme *Moral voting* conveyed a sense in which the participants believed that voting was the right thing to do. There was a sense in which this could be used as a justification for voting. This was a set of reasons why people should vote. It echoed ideas of republicanism, citizenship and civic duty. There was a lot of overlap between participants using this theme and participants using the theme *Political involvement*. The

theme *Political involvement* explained the process of becoming a voter. There was an explanation of initial rationale that they saw some gain or there was some parental encouragement. There was an explanation of why voting was critical because one vote might, for instance, be decisive and a demonstration that the participants had engaged in politics. This theme shaped participants towards voting.

It is apparent that whilst the theme *Disengagement* suggested that participants were very unlikely to vote and the theme *Moral voting* provided a justification for action, the two themes *Distrust* and *Political Involvement* were competitive and antagonistic. Participants sometimes used both and switched between them. They were perhaps in two minds about voting and to an extent were swaying between the two ideas.

#### **4.11 - The Implications of this Study: What the Results of this study Suggest about the Wider Field of Propensity to Vote**

This study then has a number of possible implications for the wider field of political behaviour; some of the findings may shed some small light on the pre-existing problems.

The first of these is that some of the participants believed in the potential decisiveness of their vote. This is contra to rational choice theories. The underlying premise behind rational choice theories is that individuals are rational calculating people. This could possibly suggest that other views on human nature, such as sociological man (Dahrendorf, 1973) may have more relevance to modern society. The second is that party identification in the participants in this study appears to be very weak and this might suggest a greater decline than has so far been reported in this cohort (Clarke et al, 2009).

The third implication is that there seems to be little inclination or talk regarding non-

electoral politics in the participant group. This might possibly suggest that the related explanation of propensity to vote needs reconsideration.

A fourth implication was that the voting participants in this study appeared to have a strong belief in civic duty, but never used the words civic duty. Instead, they used a variety of codes around the theme *Moral voting* that suggested that:

- if you did not vote then you did not have the right to complain about government;
- that voting could prevent extremism;
- that you should think of the welfare of everybody in society when casting a vote;  
and
- that voting was an important right that people had made sacrifices to gain and we should preserve that right.

The words of the participants in this study suggest a richness and complexity to the idea of civic duty that is not apparent in the questions usually asked of research participants. Clarke et al (2004) reported data regarding civic duty from the British Election studies 2005 and 2010 and the annual British Social Attitudes surveys. These asked respondents whether they agree with the statement that 'it is every citizen's duty to vote' or that 'it is everybody's duty to vote in a general election' and that not voting is a 'serious neglect' of their duties. There is a possible suggestion; therefore, from this study that a broader series of questions could be asked regarding civic duty and that there is a possible disconnection between the language of academics and ordinary individuals that might participate in research.

A fifth important implication relates to the broad areas of political efficacy, political knowledge and the media. The manner in which research into political knowledge is often carried out is for a bank of questions regarding politics to be asked to participants (see for

instance Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Clarke et al 2004; Heath et al, 2002; Heath and Tilley, 2003). This considers political knowledge to be a broad measure of knowledge about political subjects. There is clearly a complexity within the sub-theme *Distrust* that could possibly inform this area of research. Participants in this study were unsure about who was not telling the truth. Participants did not trust information and, therefore, felt less able to vote.

Similarly, research into political efficacy predominantly relies on survey research using a bank of questions regarding how people feel about their own ability to be political or to affect politics. The most important component being internal efficacy: an individual's belief in their ability to be political (See for instance Balch, 1974; Clarke and Acock, 1989; Craig and Maggiotto, 1982; Good and Mayer, 1975; Morrell, 2003; Niemi et al, 1991). This study suggests that the concept of political efficacy again might possibly be informed by this study. The individuals in this study, through their use of themes identified in this study, suggested that their sense of political efficacy was drawn principally from their belief about their knowledge of politics and their ability to understand a possibly disingenuous political media. Their belief in their ability to be political was linked to their belief in their knowledge of politics which was linked to their ability to understand the political media because that is the source of their political knowledge.

Alongside this point, the study suggests that, perhaps, external efficacy might possibly be relatively more important in younger people, the 18-24 cohort who participated in this study, than the rest of the population. Alternatively, the importance of external efficacy may be increasing in importance in comparison to internal efficacy. The sub-theme *Relevance* linked to a feeling of a lack of external efficacy. Part of this was the feeling in

the participants that, partly due to their age, the government was not interested in issues of concern to them.

A further important finding related to the importance of apathy and disengagement within the participant group, the manner in which it appears to prevent voting and the explanation for why it occurs. Recent literature on the subject of apathy in the UK suggests that the extent of apathy in young people is overstated (Marsh et al, 2007; Sloam, 2007) and that alienation is perhaps more important. Young people are not disinterested in politics just are put off by its present form. This study found something different and, therefore, could possibly inform current research. There was some small evidence of alienation: on one occasion two participants talked about taking part in a protest. On the other hand, a significant number of participants discussed being apathetic and this resulted in a disengagement from politics. This was linked to a culture of non-participation in the family.

#### **4.11.1 - A Hypothesis regarding the Declining Propensity to Vote in UK General Elections**

The final possible implication for wider political science identified in this pilot relates to the themes and codes found regarding political socialisation in the participant group. There were two codes in different themes found that related to political socialisation. The first suggested that some parents encouraged their children to vote and the second that some parents encouraged their children to abstain from voting. It is possible that low levels of political knowledge in the group and low levels of party identification shape some participants to abstain from voting despite parental encouragement.

This could then suggest a hypothesis that might explain the decline in propensity to vote from the 1992 general election onwards. As has been detailed in chapter one, there have

been a number of attempts to explain this decline. A further possibility relates to the effects of different socialisation processes in voters and non-voters and the impact of societal wide factors on those processes of socialisation. This hypothesis would depend on the presumption that, to a large degree, processes of socialisation were discursive.

The background to this hypothesis is relevant. The first election where a significant change in the attitudes to voting of the 18-24 cohort could be seen was the 1992 general election. The 18-24 cohort voting in the 1992 election would have been born between 1968 and 1974. This was an important period in political science for two reasons. This was the latter part of the period that Inglehart thought of as the change to post-materialism: when individuals began to consider lifestyle issues such as third world development and the environment rather than traditional economic based concerns (1997; 2015). There was also an important change in voting behaviour. A proportion of individuals in the UK never vote, but from this point, there was a change amongst existing voters. The population began to vote in a more volatile manner (Butler and Stokes, 1974). There was a resultant, apparent, decline in the strength of traditional party identification from the 1966 election onwards. First, there was a significant decline in party identifiers between the 1966 and 1970 general elections and there has been a decline in the number of strong party identifiers in every election since that point. There has been a corresponding rise in the numbers of weak party identifiers and individuals with no party identification (Clarke et al, 2004). This did not lead to an apparent decline in the belief in democracy (Klingemann, 1999; Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995). Rather, whilst individuals still believed in the democratic process, they were more active in their political choices and much more prepared to switch between political parties (Butler and Stokes, 1974; Clarke et al, 2004).



These events alongside the findings from this study could possibly suggest an alternative explanation for the change in attitudes to voting. In the immediate post-war period, the majority of individuals reached voting age knowing little about politics (Carpini and Keeter, 1996). The majority of first-time voters would have voted on the basis of the party identification of their parents (Butler and Stokes, 1974). Some individuals did not vote and a possibility amongst many is that they learned not to vote from their parents. In the 1960s, a change in western societies occurred and these societies became more interested in post-material issues. Adults who were becoming more interested in post-materialistic issues had a history of prior voting and a body of experience to draw upon about the prior performance of political parties and, therefore, their attitude to voting was unchanged. There was a much greater effect on their children. This might be what is being seen in the codes and themes that constitute the political socialisation process. Parents that did not vote encouraged their children to abstain from voting as possibly always happened. The apparent belief and trust in democracy influence parents that do vote to encourage their children to vote. It is possible that a proportion of these parents believe, however, as a result of the influence of post-materialistic ideas, that passing on their own party identification to their children is wrong and that their children should make their own mind about who to vote for. At the same time, it could be that very confused political knowledge and a lack of party identification put the now young adults into a dilemma. They believe they should vote but do not know who to vote for. The consequence of this is that some of them do not vote. As post-materialistic ideas continue to take hold in society an increasing number of young people abstain from voting because they do not know who to vote for.

This then suggests that the decline in voting is shaped by the discourses surrounding the decline in strong party identification (Clarke et al, 2004) combined with the cultural change in the 1960s (Inglehart, 1997; 2015) but this could have a greater effect on the second generation of voters. Those individuals in the late 1960s and early 1970s who may have begun to adopt a more post-materialistic value system have felt a significant impact but as they were already inculcated into the political system their own attitudes to voting remained largely unchanged.

#### **4.12 – Conclusions and Reflections**

The starting point for this chapter was the themes identified in this study and reported in the prior chapter. These themes suggested something about the use of social constructionist social psychology in themselves. That they had been identified suggested that social constructionist social psychology might be able to inform political science questions. However, what was still to be ascertained was whether or not these themes could be potentially useful in political science or whether they were simply incidental or spurious.

Many of the codes that were reported in the previous chapter had some relationship to the theories of political behaviour advanced in chapter one. This was to be expected as the questions asked of participants were aimed at producing responses concurrent with these theories. The reason for this was so that it could be determined whether or not using social constructionist social psychology could be producing something more or different to what we already know.

The codes and themes and their subsequent analysis have led to some very interesting and provocative findings both about the topic matter and benefits of the methodology

used. With respect to each of the ideas that I initially presented in chapter one, the study has been able to show clear resonance with existing work in the field but also some significant and tangible differences. The findings related to rational choice theory, for instance, suggest that theorists should not just ignore the calculation that a single vote could be decisive, rather there is a possibility that a number of voters may believe the exact opposite.

This then led to a number of interesting methodological points. One of which was the manner in which individuals themes appeared to cut across theoretical perspectives. The sub-theme *Dishonesty*, for instance, linked into ideas regarding political knowledge, political communication and political efficacy and the theme *Moral voting* echoed ideas of republicanism, citizenship and civic duty. This highlighted an important difference between social constructionist social psychology and the epistemological and methodological frameworks usually used in political science. Using broadly deductive political science methodologies, it might have been possible to fit the responses of the participants into several frameworks or see them as related to one framework and not the other. In the case of the first example, for instance, it may have been possible to see the participant responses as related either to political efficacy, political knowledge or political communication. This would probably depend on exactly what question was asked. Links between the ideas might not have been realised if an appropriate question had not been deployed. It also seems reasonable to suggest that the answer of the participants would be likely to be understood within the disciplinary framework of the researcher. This suggests that there are unforeseen advantages to using an inductive approach.

A number of other elements of using the methodology such as the exhaustive coding, reflection, the thematised analytic approach and the data collection method proved interesting and worth discussing further. These issues alongside others will be explored further in the next chapter where I will discuss how this study has informed the use of social constructionist social psychology within political science.

## **Chapter Five**

# **Methodological Reflections: Exploring the use of Social Constructionist Social Psychology in Political Science Research?**

### **5.1 - Introduction**

In the prior two chapters of this thesis, the themes identified in the course of this study have been reported and the implications of these both in terms of the voting attitudes of the participants and the implications for the wider population have been discussed. This chapter will now consider, in light of this, how the methodology that was used, social constructionist social psychology, has performed and what the implications of that performance are. The starting point for this is to briefly summarise the study so far but, in particular, to focus on the findings described in the last two chapters. Having done that, I will reconsider what social constructionist social psychology is and how it differs from the existing approaches that are predominantly used in political science.

There are a number of key points of difference between social constructionist social psychology and orthodox political science methodologies. I am not referring here to every piece of political science research but making some broad brush points to illustrate differences. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to suggest that the majority of political science research is:

- dominated by survey research and other quantitative methods (Bartels and Brady, 1993; Jackson, 1996; King, 2008) whilst social constructionist social psychology predominantly uses semi-structured interviews and other qualitative tools;
- broadly deductive whilst social psychology is more commonly but not wholly inductive;
- usually based on realism whilst social psychology tends to be based, more often, on social constructionism (Burr, 2003; 2015); alongside this
- social psychology has adopted more of what has been termed the linguistic turn in social sciences and, consequently, is far more likely to be discursively based and influenced by post-structuralism (Rorty, 1967).

There are consequences to these broad features of social constructionist social psychology and differences between it and orthodox political science methodologies that are important and will be discussed in this chapter. Some of these are broadly positive some are less beneficial. The first four points that will be considered are broad benefits of using the methodology. The first of these is the idea of coding exhaustively so that each piece of text is linked to every possible code. This idea stems from the social constructionist view that people hold a variety of perspectives on issues and that there are multiple equally appropriate versions of reality. Consequently, talk is rarely straightforward and individuals may comment from multiple perspectives (Burr, 2015) and coding, therefore, needs to reflect this. A second idea is that reflection is an important part of the research process (Finlay, 2002; Parker, 2004). This stems from social construction's view that it is impossible for the researcher not to have an impact on the research process or to have a wholly neutral impact on the research process. If we accept then that the researcher essentially co-produces the product of research and that it is not

a wholly objective, then reflection becomes an important tool to illuminate the role of the researcher in producing the research (Finlay, 2002; Parker, 2004). Whilst it is important to recognise that reflection is used with a range of methodologies the key issue within this methodological approach is its role. A third important idea is the broadly inductive approach that social constructionism uses (Smith, 1998). Whilst notions of induction have historically been associated with methodologies such as standard positivism which are not relevant to or akin to social constructionism, the broad approach of a bottom up participant led direction to research is important to and produces dividends for this methodological approach and a range of other qualitative methods (Pascale, 2010). The last point made, which was of unequivocal benefit, was the process of using a thematised method within social constructionism. It is not necessary for social constructionism work to use a thematised method (Braun and Clarke, 2006) but it is a common feature of much of this work. The benefits of doing so are that it works with the inductive bottom up approach to producing a number of the key findings of this study.

The next two points regarding the methodology are a little more ambiguous and are essentially issues of the methodology that I regard as having inherent benefits as well as drawbacks. The first issue is the process of group semi-structured interviewing. There is clearly a range of ideas here and whilst all sit comfortably within the methodology it is important to highlight that not all social constructionist social psychology uses group interviews. There were clear benefits to doing so in the depth and complexity of talk that could be accessed using this particular style of sampling of talk. On the other hand, despite the best of intentions this type of interviews could degenerate into something that was effectively a series of one-to-one interviews and involved very little dialogue. A second issue was the process of the interviewer constructing data with the participants.

Acknowledging that this was happening was important but the process was one of introducing themes to a conversation that the interviewees could then discuss or ignore. The key issue was that this required careful preparation on the part of the interviewer. Interviewers need to prepare an appropriate range of secondary questions before interviews and also carefully reflect on how well they performed within interviews to ensure that as much as possible was achieved in the interview process.

There were also a number of issues noted which were problematic for the methodology. The first issue was a reliance on the skills of the researcher and interviewer. There were two particularly important areas with this. First, accessing the participants talk through interviewing required certain social skills and second reflecting on the researchers' role in the study. The broad problems with these areas are that they are not necessarily easy to accomplish, it is difficult to understand how well these roles have been performed and they may impact on the quality and fruitfulness of research. A second broadly problematic issue is that of reticent participants. There were occasions when interviewees had very little to say and the issues with this is that we do not know why it is occurring. There is an obvious issue in that there may be a pattern of reticence within a participant group that could alter or take away from what a study has to say.

The chapter then considers three areas. First, the chapter discusses why we should use social constructionist social psychology. This is a summation of the arguments for and against its use presented in the chapter. The chapter then discusses the possible uses of discursive psychology in political science, highlighting areas that would be problematic. These are often areas of incommensurability between realist and social constructionist methodologies. Finally, the chapter concludes by considering the contribution of this thesis to the field and how the work in the thesis could be taken forward.



## 5.2 - The Study and its Findings

The study reported here aimed to explore what benefits and limitations would be of using a social constructionist social psychology methodology within political science. Therefore, a present thorny and contentious problem in political science; the change in UK general electoral turnout particularly amongst the 18 -24 cohort since the 1992 general election, was explored using this approach. The problem, because of its contentious nature, had already had numerous competing explanations of the change in propensity to vote amongst this cohort forwarded and it was hoped that a social constructionist social psychology approach would possibly shed some light on these current explanations. Although, the overarching aim of the study was to consider the benefits and limitations of using an unusual methodology within a political science framework.

The data collection for the study was achieved with the aid of forty participants who all had the opportunity to be first-time voters in the 2010 general election divided into two roughly equal groups, voters and non-voters. The participants took part in twelve group interviews around and shortly after the general election. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using a thematised social constructionist approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Four broad themes were identified. Two of these appeared to shape participants towards abstaining and two shaped participants towards voting.

The first two themes were referred to as *Distrust* and *Disengagement*. Participants using the theme *Distrust* did not believe that government worked for them or would do what it had promised to do whilst those using the *Disengagement* theme, as theme suggested did not engage with the political sphere to any great degree, and knew so little about politics that they would have found it hard to vote in a manner that reflected their stance on issues or was more than simply putting a cross in a box. The second two themes were

called *Political involvement* and *Moral voting*. The first of these charted the process of increasing involvement in the political process and awareness of its importance, the second explained a broad justification for voting and participation on moral grounds.

The themes worked together to shape the behaviour of participants. *Moral voting* linked to *Political involvement* and seemed to be an important qualitative description of the push and the desire to become involved in politics. The three themes *Political involvement*, *Moral voting* and *Distrust* seemed to work in conflict with each other with participants, to an extent, switching between them. This seemed to reflect some of the turmoil regarding the decision to vote or not. Participants both feeling that they should vote and that they wanted to vote but at the same time finding it difficult to do so. On the other hand, the theme *Disengagement* seemed to reflect a group of participants with very little involvement in political life.

The four themes linked to a range of current explanation of changes in voting behaviour. They informed the explanations and provided additional information regarding how and why the propensity to vote may have changed. Key points included:

- that there was a connection between political efficacy, political communication and political knowledge;
- that there was a culture of learning to abstain from voting;
- that party identification was weak;
- that civic duty quite was complex;
- that participants were apathetic not disengaged;
- that there was little sign of non-electoral politics; and
- that the participants did not vote rationally.

## **5.3 - Contrasting Social Constructionist Social Psychology and Orthodox**

### **Political Science Methodologies**

The methodology, social constructionist social psychology, used in this study has important differences with existing methodologies predominantly used in political science. It has been argued that modern political science has been dominated by large-scale survey research and formal modelling borrowed from econometrics (Bartels and Brady, 1993; Jackson, 1996; King, 2008). Even more apparent within political science is the commitment to a realist or essentialist epistemology, this is partly because of the dominance of quantitative methods. Having said that, there is a smaller but important and noteworthy body of qualitative work in political science that was highlighted in the first chapter of this thesis.

Similarly, it is important to highlight that a number of other methods, over and above those already mentioned, exist and are used within political science. Case studies and comparison between case studies are particularly important, for instance, when comparing political institutions (George 1979; George and Bennett, 2005; Leiberson 1991; Ragin 1987; Skocpol and Somers, 1980). Similarly, in - depth interviewing (Kvale, 1996; Rubin and Rubin, 1995; Spradley, 1979) has been used by many political scientists as a research method particularly when researching political actors. There have also been studies on the fringes of political science that use ethnographic methodology (see for instance Geertz, 1973).

There are some broad observations that can be made about the consequence of these two factors within political science research methodology. First, it is common to use large randomised samples across national populations. Second, although there a number of researchers in political science using methods such as focus groups and content analysis,

it is unusual to talk to participants in an unscheduled, unstructured manner. There is no creation of dialogue within a survey process or formal modelling. Third, it is also less usual to talk to ordinary people when political scientists use interviews, particularly so when it is the principal investigative tool. Research interviews in political science are often elite interviews. These are conducted with individuals such as politicians or bureaucrats that are potentially going to treat the interview in a manner inconsistent with research as they are reasonably likely to have had prior experience of journalistic interviews and be adept at managing opinions (Berry, 2002; Goldstein, 2002, Morris, 2009). Fourth, it is unusual to conduct large qualitative studies although qualitative studies in political science as has already been mentioned do happen. Fifth, there is a presumption that talk is straightforward and individuals are answering questions in a straightforward manner rather than this being their perspective of reality (Holstein and Gubrium, 1975; Buckholdt and Gubrium, 1979).

Social constructionist social psychology differs from orthodox and principally quantitative and realist methods in several key respects. It questions the broad assumptions that realism and essentialism makes and particularly their reliance on the observable and measurable nature of reality; considering issues such as participation to be much more complex than simple changes in responses to surveys or other research instruments. Drawing on the work of post-structuralists, such as Foucault (2002), it considers that knowledge is both historically and culturally specific. This is not just to say that concept and ideas have meanings within particular cultural and historical frameworks but also that they are artefacts of that framework. Our knowledge is contingent and both made and remade by the social processes impacting upon it. Our present understanding of ideas, such as marriage, is no more than the social impact that the institution has upon us

and if we lived in a different history or culture, our understanding of marriage would be determined by the social impact of that history and culture. The social impact, our understanding and our knowledge of issues and ideas then impact on our actions. This study, for instance, looks at electoral participation and the manner in which we understand electoral participation affects the way we the act. Finally, social constructionism suggests that language has a pivotal role in epistemology suggesting that there is no single observable version of social events but rather multiples perspectives (Burr, 2003; 2015). In this social constructionism draws on a range of prior academic thought starting with Wittgenstein's (1921; 1999), Searle's (1969; 1979) and Austin's (1975) linguistic philosophy moving through a range anthropological sources (see Gumperz and Levinson, 1996; Harre and Muhlhausler, 1990) and post-Marxist Bakhtinian thought (see Holquist, 1990; Todorov, 1984) and culminating in the current post-structuralist approaches exemplified by authors such as Potter and Wetherell (1987) and Hollway (1989).

### **5.3.1 - Differences in Approaches to Quality**

There are several important differences between orthodox political science methodologies and social constructionist social psychology. These lie in their approaches to quality, ethics and the inductive or deductive nature of their consequent methods. In orthodox political science research, there are a number of different types of validity which are important in research designs. Internal validity is a measure of the extent to which causal relationships can be seen in an experimental design and extraneous variables do not affect results. External validity and the similar idea of ecological validity relate to the extent that research can be seen to be realistic and a mirror to the outside world (Bloom, 2006; Morton and Williams, 2008; Kirk 2012).

Consideration of the internal validity of the research is more complex. That the research is internally valid is, to an extent, dependent on the process of measurement used as well as the research design. There are three areas usually considered: criterion validity, construct validity and content validity. The first of these ideas, criterion validity, is the process of measuring research outcomes against what they predict. Construct validity refers to the extent to which concepts created within the research process actually represent what they claim to represent. Finally, content validity is, principally, the extent that the study appears to measure what it presumes to. This is commonly known as face validity (ibid).

The arguments against this approach to quality from a social constructionist approach centre on the epistemology of orthodox political science methodologies. Again, although not wishing or claiming to describe the whole of political science research, it is a fair claim to say that political is dominated by work that adopts a realist, sometimes termed an essentialist epistemological stance. That is to say, it argues that there is a singular real world out there; that there is an underlying reality that can hence be determined or, more to the point, increasingly well observed and described (Smith, 1998). The whole of the quality framework of orthodox political science can then be seen to be focused on describing this singular reality.

Social constructionism as a methodology has a number of roots and draws on the work of a number of authors that have been connected with the linguistic turn in social sciences and post-structuralism (Burr, 2015; Rorty, 1967). The key assumptions that social constructionism makes are that our understanding of the social world is:

- historically and culturally situated;
- is made and remade by social processes; and

- shapes our consequent actions within that social world (Burr, 2015)

As a result, of this social constructionist research usually focuses on the talk of individuals, considers that talk is complex and that individuals can be doing a number of simultaneous things with that talk. This is dependent on the social positioning of the individual when uttering comments and individuals can adopt a number of different social positions deploying different talk within them. The object of social constructionist research is usually the talk of participants and meaning is co-constructed, often in dialogue with the researcher (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002; Potter, 1996; Potter and Wetherell; 1987).

There are a number of consequences of this methodological approach that are in direct contrast to orthodox political science methodologies and in particular with quantitative political science. First, the methodology uses and produces a large corpus of qualitative data from a relatively small number of participants, either by interviews or through the collection of naturally occurring talk, that would be unusual in quantitative political science. Second, this is then analysed in a manner which suggests that individuals are using talk with a number of different meanings and consequently coding is exhaustive, overlapping and often to multiple codes for the same passage of talk (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Third, the interviewer is active in the construction and production of data. Fourth, as the participant group was chosen purposefully this allowed a focus on a topic area that is unusual although not unheard of in political science. Consequently, in this study, there was a focus on a particularly small cohort of individuals from the UK that would be possibly difficult to isolate in a large survey examining the same topics.

This has implications for the approach to quality within social constructionism. Ideas such as validity mean little when there is a number of possible, and equally warranted and credible, perspectives on a social situation depending on social positioning (Wetherell,

1998; 2003). As a result, of this quality in social constructionism focuses broadly on two ideas. First, the extent that talk can be recognised by others; this a notion dependent on the idea of intersubjectivity (Trevarthen, 1979), that we must share meaning and ideas about the social world in order to communicate but cautioned by the awareness that meaning can go awry and that understanding can be asynchronous. Therefore, whilst identifying themes and codes within talk may be dependent on a process of recognition by the researcher, this is concurrent with peer and participant confirmation of findings and a desire to fully evidence findings. Second, that there is an earnest process of reflection on the part of the researcher to consider their part in the production of the findings. Whether through the process of coding or interviewing or simply through ideas as writing briefing documents for participants, it is presumed that the researcher will have some impact on the research process (Finlay, 2002; Parker, 2004).

### **5.3.2 – Differences in Ethical Approaches**

There are important further differences in the ethical approaches of the two methodologies. The issue of ethics within research focuses on the realisation of the rights of the participants in that research. Within both realist and essentialist research processes there are a number of shared points of concern. These stem from the idea that participants are, in all cases, protected from harm. Consequently, researchers are required to consider and assess the risk that participants may face. The major points that tend to feature in any consequent research plan are that participants give informed and valid consent to participate in the study and that they have an ongoing right to privacy. One of the issues that arises is an awareness of the power of the researcher in the research situation and a consequent commitment to ensuring that the participants are



heard, through reporting the results of the research in an etic manner: in the voice of the participant (Harre, 1980).

From this point on the approach to several key ethical points within social constructionism are different from that of realism. The first point made revolves around issues of power and influence throughout the research processes. The arguments made is that despite efforts in realist research to give equal footing to participants within the research process the researcher has an undue influence throughout it. The argument made is that researchers chose the questions or topics that the research focuses on, that researchers often limit or constrain the options for answers by providing multiple choices, but choices, nevertheless, limited and designed by the researcher, within items such as surveys and that the researchers are the only people analysing and determining what the responses mean (Gergen, 1973; 2001). The consequent result of this is that what we hear is the voice of the researcher, not the participant. The approach often used in realist methodology is an attempt to provide equality of stimulus to the participants and to ensure that the research process is objective and valid (Oppenheim, 1992). The argument made by social constructionists is that realist research is, in fact, value-laden and these are, often as not, the values of the researcher.

Social constructionism does not see itself as immune to these problems, rather that they are a quality of all research and instead suggests two processes aimed at ensuring that the voices of the participants are heard and that research quality is enhanced. The importance of reflection by the researcher considering and reporting the impact they are having on the research process has already been discussed and this has a clear impact on this issue. However, over and above this, social constructionist usually adopts an

approach of publishing, whenever possible, the majority of the material produced within a study so that participants input can be seen directly.

The second point is that social constructionism suggests that, as a result of the idea of the decentred self (Derrida, 1978; Hollway, 1989), individuals will hold a variety of perspectives on issues (Burr, 2015). One of the consequences of that is that individuals will adopt multiple narratives within speech; they will talk from the variety of viewpoints that they hold. This is referred to as narrative multiplicity (Gergen and Kaye, 1992; Penn and Frankfurt, 1994). The idea of narrative multiplicity naturally creates problems for any epistemology that rely on the idea of a single monolithic reality but it also further provokes ethical issues for realist, essentialist approaches. This is simply the result of the process just described. We can think of the realist approach not only having undue influence within the research process but also attempting to force the participants into one response and one view of reality when they hold multiple warrantable viewpoints. Social constructionism with its acceptance of different perspectives and multiple narratives consequently listens to all of the perspectives of the participants.

### **5.3.3 – Inherent Analytic Approaches: Adoption of Inductive or Deductive Techniques**

A further key difference between the two approaches is in their usual approach to analytically determining findings. The realist approach to producing results often relies on a process of deduction. The process of deductions starts with an idea about a social situation, a theory about how some element of the social world works. From this initial beginning, through a process of logical deduction, various presumptions and hypotheses regarding people's behaviour may be determined and, subsequently, through a further process of deduction, predictions of what we should be able to observe can be made.

Then the social scientist would undertake a series of observations in order to determine

what is known as empirical regularity under given conditions. These observations are then compared with the predictions of behaviour and the initial theory is adjusted in light of these observations (Lipsey et al, 1963; Smith, 1998). This broad approach to determining knowledge can be thought of as being achieved through logical deduction. As in much of this prior two sections, one key point of this approach is that it adopts a top-down strategy to research. The ideas about how the world emanates from the researcher rather than the participants. In addition to this, though, it is also relevant to highlight that the approach tends to atomise issues. Ideas are seen as bounded and distinct from the rest of the social world.

One alternative approach to knowledge is induction. The starting point for inductive work is that through repeated observation of the phenomena, the phenomenon can be seen to exist and laws can be determined regarding the behaviour of these phenomena. These can then be proved or disproved through processes of verification where different observers attempt to see the same phenomenon and come to similar conclusions perhaps in different circumstances (Smith 1998). This then has two significant differences from the prior approach. The first being that it can be participant led and the second being that the starting point for analysis is the data or in the case of this study the talk of participants. Although a large generalisation, it would be fair to say that political science methodology is dominated by deductive studies.

A tendency to adopt a similar approach can be seen in work that is regarded as critically realist. Here the difference is that it is accepted that observations or evidence cannot be assumed to be straightforward but rather needs interpretation. Consequently, there is a search for a mechanism to inform theoretical relationships such as A says B as a

consequence of relationship C (Lawson, 1997; Sayer, 1992; 2000). Although, exponents of critical realism refer to this further step as retrodution (Blaikie, 2004)

Social constructionism has several points that are akin to induction and it shares some key points, although there are important differences. Social constructionism starts with the talk of participants as the source of data. This is, therefore, a bottom-up participant-derived approach. Although relationship and understanding of the data are broadly researcher led there are processes of peer and participant confirmation and reflection, as opposed to a process of verification, to ensure that the bases for findings are not asynchronous.

## **5.4 - Arguments for the Use of Social Constructionist Social Psychology**

As a consequence of differences in methodological approaches between social constructionist social psychology and the methodologies commonly used in political science a number of beneficial elements of the methodology were noted. These elements of the methodology created an environment where the interesting and, perhaps, important results described, in the second section of this chapter, were produced. These elements constitute, in large part, the arguments for the use of social constructionist social psychology in this study and highlight reasons that benefits could be realised in future research.

### **5.4.1 -The Advantages of Coding exhaustively such that Elements of Scripts are Coded to all Possible Codes**

The first of these related to the exhaustive coding undertaken in social constructionist social psychology. Within this study, each piece of text was examined and would then be placed into every possible code that was appropriate. This is an unusual approach to

qualitative research. The majority of qualitative realist research would insist on a piece of transcribed text only being placed in the code that it best fitted. The reasons for this different approach stem from linguistic scholars' hypothesis that individuals are usually performing several activities within each piece of talk (Austin, 1975; Searle 1969; 1979; Wittgenstein; 1999); and that talk is a complex process where speakers may be talking from multiple perspectives (Burr, 2015). The consequences of this complex notion of speech are problematic for a range of research methods that consider meaning as fixed in speech: it problematises a number of alternative qualitative methodological approaches to social constructionist social psychology. It suggests that speech or talk is a problematic source of data unless a methodological approach that works with multiple perspectives, such as social constructionist social psychology, is used (Potter and Wetherell, 1992).

There are clear practical advantages to adopting this ontological and epistemological approach to talk of discursive psychology when coding. Talk is a very complicated process and if one is attempting to use a best-fit approach to coding there are often situations where codes appear to overlap or there are conflicts over which code a piece of text should go in.

This is not to say that the social constructionist social psychology approach to coding is problem free. There are three issues that arise from using this element of the methodology. First, it tends to mean that many more instances of codes are found in comparison to other methods. This might suggest to an outside observer that the methodology is necessarily more productive than other approaches when it is not. Although the fruitfulness of this type of work is indicative of quality (Potter and Wetherell; 1987), that quality is not simply based on extensive coding but also on subsequent detailed analysis and reflection. Second, instances of codes can initially be

weakly evidenced and they may need detailed reflection, searching for further examples and confirmation by others to establish their credibility. Third, the boundaries of each instance of a code tend to be less well defined. Consequently, because of all three issues, later sorting requires both discipline and reflection on the part of the researcher.

An illustration of exhaustive coding is in Extract 22 overleaf. The first few lines are particularly interesting and start to explain the complexity of coding in social constructionist social psychology: Participant W refers to Nick Clegg as a little boy playing in a big boy world. This is reinforced by the 'out of his depth' metaphor that suggests someone who is inexperienced, in trouble and, perhaps, drowning. This initially appears to be one code related to the *Distrust* theme. Then, however, participant W appears to change tack halfway through the comments, at line 580 and suggests that confidence and belief mean that you can say anything that you want. Shortly after, participant W then returns to the idea of Nick Clegg being confident and talks about politicians not telling the truth at line 592, 595 and 597. It is apparent that the first comments were leading to this. This passage of speech was coded to three separate overlapping codes. The first of these relates to comments regarding *Dishonest politicians* consisted of the majority of this passage, starting on the first. A second code focused on distrust of the political media and began when participant W mentioned the party leader's debate at line 573. A third code, *Spatial voting*, began with participant Y suggesting that it's about policies not personalities at line 584. The extract then returns back to the initial code, *Dishonest politicians*, starting with participant W comment about politicians not answering peoples' questions at line 592.

Whilst, naturally, this is an example of initial coding and further iterations always involve some adjustment. It is apparent that attempting to code the whole passage into one code

or another would result in a conflict over where to code to and a loss of some of the explanatory power of the data.

Extract 22, Transcript 7

- 569 W Because I think Nick Clegg (.) you can clearly see  
570 watching him (.) that he was a little boy (.) playing in a  
571 big boy world
- 572 I Right
- 573 W When you were watching the debate (.) even though he  
574 kind of did really well (.) he seemed really out of his  
575 depth (.) so I think it's if he was standing there with  
576 strong confidence and belief it means you can (.) put  
577 across what you want to say
- 578 I Right
- 579 X Yeah (.) so
- 580 W I think matey said (.) he's got a lot of confidence (.) as  
581 you say
- 582 V Yeah a lot of confidence (.) he's got or the biggest head  
583 (.) I don't know
- 584 Y It's hard to put apart and not put the personalities into  
585 it (.) it's what they are offering not the personalities
- 586 I Right (.) OK (.) umm (.) do you think they struggle with  
587 these sort of public debates
- 588 X Umm (.) got (.) why are you meaning three different  
589 parties or

590 I Yeah (.) you know (.) do you think are struggling

591 X Yeah (.) labour did struggle a lot

592 W I think they do very well (.) to not answer people's

593 questions

594 X Yeah

595 W Then they form an answer

596 X That's true as well

597 W If they are put on the spot (.) they will do anything they

598 can (.) to avoid giving a proper answer (.) when you see

599 like television interviews (.) people like (.) with all due

600 respect you still haven't answered my question (.) you'll

601 always get that a lot

602 I Yeah

603 W So it's obvious that whenever they are in the wrong (.)

604 you'll just see the same answer repeated all the time

#### 5.4.2 – The Arguments and Advantages of the Use of Reflection

A central idea in social constructionism is that reflection is a generator of quality within social science research. Speaking of reflection within orthodox political science circles is problematic as the process means different things depending on your methodological approach. Within orthodox realist political science approaches the researcher and interviewers attempt to adopt a neutral to the participants such that each participant has equivalency of stimuli (Oppenheim, 1992) and then a process of validation occurs to ensure that the results of studies are credible and generalisable. Researchers will commonly reflect on their own objectivity. This approach has been criticised though on



two fronts. First, that the rigidity, in itself, of this type of research process can create bias (Briggs, 1986; Mishler, 1986, Suchman and Jordan, 1990). Second, that, depending on the audience, there are quite different accounts used of the process of producing valid work within science (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1982).

The process of reflection within social constructionist social psychology is one where researchers engage in a self-aware analysis of their part in the research process. There are a number of parts to this that need unpacking. First, there is a clear need to consider what the individual researcher brings into the research process and what impact this could have. This may be in terms of desires from the research, background, outlook or familial context and such issues as personal political views, class, gender, sexuality or ethnicity depending on the research question and context. Second, a particularly important part of this may be your methodological views and preferences and how they impinge on the decisions that you take within the research process. Finally, how your particular projects sits within the broader discipline and which elements of that discipline shape the broad stance of the study that you are undertaking (Finlay, 2002; Wilkinson, 1988).

The aim of reflection is threefold. It:

- can serve to rebalance the power between participants and researcher;
- can develop the research analysis by creating awareness of the various commonly tacit and hidden impacts upon it; and
- allows the audience to appreciate the research output by creating transparency and awareness of how the researcher has impacted on the research findings (ibid).

There has been a variety of criticisms of reflection as a tool that are important to consider. The first is that the process of reflection can result in an over relativistic analysis where no solid grounding for findings are left because there has been a process of reflection upon reflection upon reflection. Second, it is important not to overvalue the process of reflexivity, in that the claims made on a social constructionist account are always limited and partial due to the social, historical and cultural specificity within the epistemological framework and the often geographically-limited and time-limited nature of studies (Finlay, 2002; Potter and Wetherell, 1995). I think as a result of these issues within reflection it is critical to understand what the purpose of reflection is and what you are trying to achieve rather than the reflection becoming an end in itself.

Within this study, there were a number of advances in understanding that were a result of being reflective that would not have been achieved through other methods. One of the key points was the realisation that the language I was using whilst writing up and coding, and to an extent my understanding of what the participants were saying, was predominantly associated with political science. I realised, at the same time, that my explanations of research outcomes within the process of participant confirmation were similarly closely linked to my academic background and consequently, started avoiding ideas such as propensity to vote, in those exercises, in favour of phrases such as the likelihood of voting.

These reflections brought up issues of accessibility and audience for me and made me consider who I was writing for. I recognised that ultimately I had to write for a particular audience and that the audience would be broadly academic but at the same time, I am aware that there is and has been a slight change in perspective and meaning between the original talk of the participants and my framework of understanding.

Similarly, I am aware that because of the manner in which I came into this study from a politically involved family and being academically interested in participation it was much more difficult to question non-voters in comparison to voters. My understanding of how a non-voter thought and approached the idea of voting was far weaker than my understanding of voters. I was a voter and I understood and had studied that process. I did not understand abstention in the same way: only from the point of view of a voter looking in. There were consequences to this. I do not think that the supplementary questions following on from the questioning of non-voters was clearly focussed as that of voters and I found it harder to establish a rapport with non-voters in the interviews. I also think that my analysis of the themes was inherently weaker because I had less empathy with the views being expressed. As a consequence of this, I then had to carefully consider what was said in the processes of peer and member confirmation that I used.

Having recognised both some of the benefits of being reflective in this study and some of the dangers of reflection as an approach the conclusions that I reach are that reflection is and should be an important part of research but this is something that needs to be approached in a careful goal-orientated, manner.

#### **5.4.3 - The Advantages of a Bottom-up Inductive Approach**

A third important benefit of using social constructionist social psychology in this study was its bottom-up, broadly, inductive approach. I have already highlighted the differences between induction and social constructionism. It is important to point out again that whilst inductive work does happen in political science (See for instance Carvalho and Winters, 2014; Henn et al, 2002) it is less common and quantitative deductive methods dominate the field (Bartels and Brady, 1993; Jackson, 1996; King, 2008). The rationale behind this is that generalising past the data collection is much more difficult using

inductive methods simply because you cannot be sure that each participant has had the same stimulus. The difference between the inductive approach and the deductive approach usually used in political science is that the starting point for the theory is the participants rather than the researcher. There are a number of benefits to using a broadly inductive approach that can be overlooked. Consider extract 23 below

Extract 23, Transcript 2

- 243 D Well I think (.) like face value (.) like they think like (.)  
244 that's what they see in the paper and that's how they  
245 interpret (.) because we I mean all know persuasive  
246 language that is used in (.) in the papers and whatever  
247 (.) or even on the news or whatever (.) you know it's all  
248 come from (.) I don't know the background of how news  
249 stories are produced but (.) I should imagine there is  
250 some subjectivity in there for how you select the facts  
251 and things (.) and then (.) say I think a lot of people vote  
252 off umm (.) off the mainstream idea (.) so you know (.) if  
253 a lot of people (.) if the people behind (.) and they were  
254 meant to give like a general view and they're unbiased  
255 on the news (.) they never have been
- 256 E I think it would be clear if they made some sort of (.)  
257 maybe a programme just to say look (.) this is what  
258 Liberals believe in (.) this is what the conservatives  
259 believe in (.) wouldn't that be so easy (.) for everyone
- 260 D Yeah (.) and very like

261 F Like government broadcasts (.) around (.) I dunno (.) like  
 262 you get them on the Simpsons (.) like you know (.) it  
 263 comes on and like (.) says this is what the Conservatives  
 264 are doing (.) and it comes on for like ten minutes and it's  
 265 like I can't be bothered to change channel (.) so I'll  
 266 watch it and I just don't care like (.) your just getting in  
 267 the way of the Simpsons (.) but (.) an like so they do do  
 268 that (.) but if you had like (.) you know the major two  
 269 cos there's only like (.) you know there's only gonna be  
 270 Lib Dem (.) not Lib Dem they're rubbish (.) the  
 271 conservatives versus Labour (.) so we just gonna need  
 272 that all the time really isn't it(.) so if you had them like  
 273 (.) like the programme said you two (.) you know fight  
 274 kinda thing (.) and then just see which one is better (.)  
 275 and then people would be able to vote on it I think but

Lines 243 to 255 suggest that participant D does not believe the political communication that they get through the media and that they have weak political knowledge. There is an issue with their own belief in their ability which comes through in the transcript. This is reinforced and also apparent in the response by participant E (lines 256-259). At this point, participant F corroborates the idea by suggesting that the major parties should have government broadcasts explaining what they stand for (lines 261 – 275). From this and others examples through the study, it was concluded that there was a link between political knowledge, political communication, the media and political efficacy. I would suggest that an approach that attempts to see what is there, rather than testing an idea,

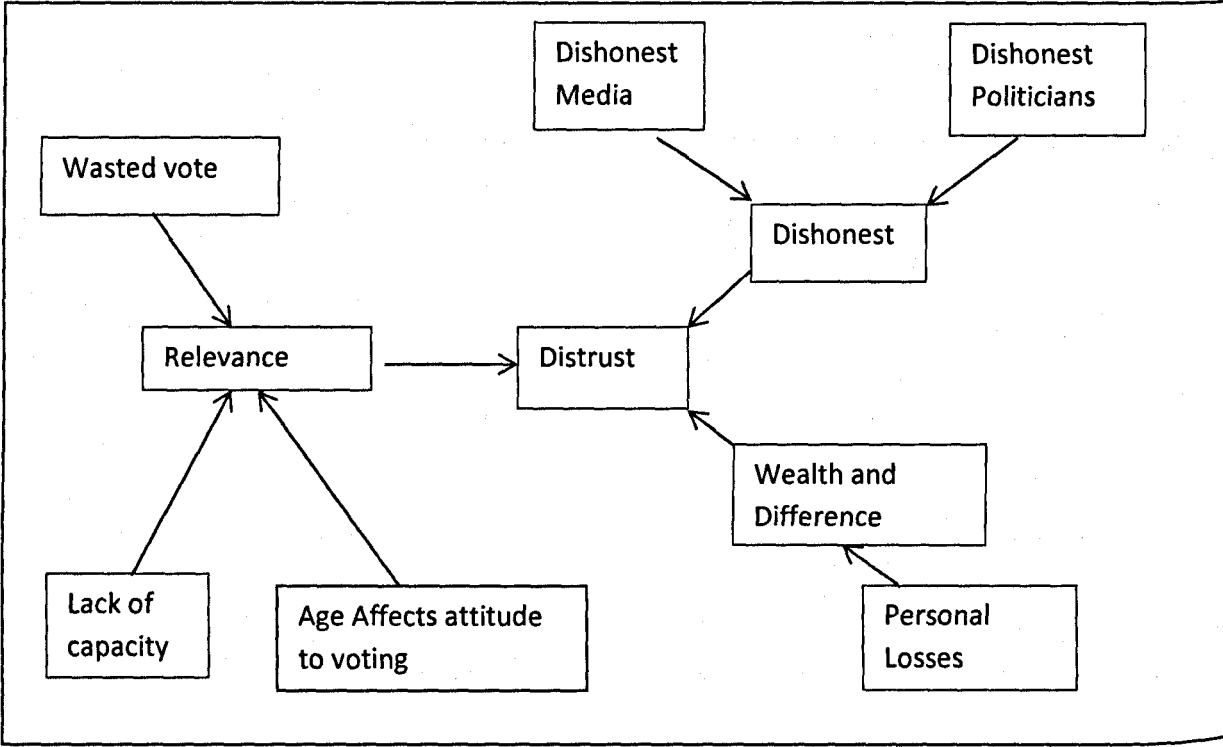
would be better at discovering fortuitous findings. This serendipity is a known benefit of inductive methods (Fine and Keegan, 1996).

#### **5.4.4 – The Advantages of Using a Thematized Approach**

A fourth important element of the study was the use of a thematic approach. The relevance of the thematic approach is that it is an underlying precursor to a range of qualitative and social constructionist approaches. This is not to say that all qualitative approaches or all social constructionism are thematized rather simply to highlight that it is an important underlying method. The process of thematic analysis within social constructionism starts with exhaustive coding. Each piece of the text is coded to all possible codes. Then there is a process of determining what themes and sub-themes are within the data. This process is highly iterative with the researcher moving between the raw transcripts, clarifying codes, forming codes into themes and illustrating how the codes explain the corpus of talk as a whole. This then moves into a process of writing and analysis where the implications of the terms on behaviour are discussed (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The key beneficial points of this relate to the iterative elements of forming the codes into themes and explaining the body of data from the themes as a whole. This was very effective at establishing links across existing theories and explaining behaviour as part of the process of induction just described. If you consider the Distrust theme in figure 5.1 overleaf, it is apparent, as I have just explained and highlighted in the prior section, that it describes and links ideas of political knowledge, political efficacy and political communication.

Figure 5.1 – The Distrust Theme



5.5 - Exploring Arguments for the use of Social Constructionist Social

Psychology in Political Science that had Drawbacks

In this study issues were apparent that were three arguments for the use of social constructionist social psychology but had some drawbacks.

5.5.1 - The Advantages and Disadvantages of the Semi-structured Group Interview Approach

A first issue focused on the interview approach. The semi-structured interview approach (Babbie, 2012; Bryman, 2015; Flick, 1998; 2009; Patton, 1990; Silvermann, 2005; 2009) used in this study was both productive and problematic. In this study, the interviews were to be broadly interviewee-led. The interviewer would attempt to start the conversation with a topic question. Participants then took the conversation in the direction that they

wished to go. The interviewer would, at points through the interview, introduce new topic questions to ensure all points of interest were discussed or to try and reinvigorate the dialogue where the conversation had died off. This is consistent with the social constructionist approach as it is aimed at allowing the various perspectives of the participants to be realised.

There were some advantages and disadvantages of this process. There were a number of occasions where interviewees would lead the interviews for significant periods of time. Interviewees would ask each other questions and comment on what each other had said. This produced very useful data. However, the data produced could be very complex with participants often all talking at the same time. This was particularly difficult to transcribe and some data was lost because it was inaudible. I, as the researcher also had to take care that participants were not intimidating each other and some degree of moderation was required in ensuring that all participants had equal opportunities to speak and that the participants spoke and behaved reasonably.

In transcript 24 below there is an example of where the semi-structured group interview process worked well. This is an excerpt from a long piece of dialogue regarding whether or not politicians can be trusted. Here the participants are interacting and asking each other questions and commenting on what each other has said. This passage highlights the benefits of semi-structured interviewing in terms of the quality of data that can be achieved. The passage shows a significant amount of interesting comment and data contributing to three codes.

Extract 24, transcript 7

111 I Are they doing this deliberately



112 V They might not necessarily be lying (.) because (.) if  
 113 they're going on with the intention of being in power for  
 114 more than one season (.) then their plans and what  
 115 their promising might not predictably be predicted (.)  
 116 what they first planned  
 117 Y So why wouldn't they tell us that  
 118 X Well I suppose  
 119 W You think they'd probably do that  
 120 V The people that are out there (.) yeah (.) we're all quite  
 121 clever but there is people out there you would say that  
 122 and mmm (.) so they don't bore you with the details (.)  
 123 their ins and outs of the plans  
 124 W It (.) Its seems like they get a good idea in their head (.)  
 125 which they believe is a good idea (.) that they can  
 126 change (.) then as soon as they get into power they  
 127 realise it's not as easy (.) to do as they thought it would  
 128 be  
 129 I Right  
 130 W Say that (.) say that you can't complain  
 131 V if everyone's moaning about them about them (.) cos  
 132 they were promised something (.) and they're not doing  
 133 it  
 134 X They've got to this point (.) its (.) it's one of those  
 135 categories they use to come to vote where

There were also occasions when participants said very little for extended periods within interviews and others where the process deteriorated to one where I was undertaking a series of individual interviews in the group. This was both less productive in terms of the codes produced but also, should raise questions about the extent to which this was the participants' own voices at work and the extent that I was constructing the talk. There are, of course, a range of reasons why participants might be reticent and the talk that can be gained is often still very valuable yet it must raise questions and suggest that further reflection regarding the interview process would be of benefit (King and Horrocks, 2010).

Extract 25 below is an example of the latter: where the semi-structured interview technique did not work well. This highlights that although semi-structured group interviewing can be a particularly beneficial research strategy within research, the benefits are dependent on the rapport between the participants and between the participants and the interviewer. Prior to the interviews, in this study, some preparation work was undertaken to try and ensure that the participants were familiar with each other and the interviewer. Despite this, some interviews were far less productive and their quality concerned me relative to others.

#### Extract 25, Transcript 3

- 51 I Why do you vote then
- 52 J I didn't really have a good reason
- 53 I You didn't (.) so what did you just do it because you
- 54 thought it was the right thing to do
- 55 J I just did it for jokes (.) really
- 56 I Jokes (.) all right
- 57 J And my girlfriend told me to

Slightly later in the same interview.

- 68 I Umm (.) what about umm (.) you know (.) did you vote  
69 Labour  
70 J Lib Dem  
71 I Lib Dem (.) why did you vote for Lib Dem  
72 J Umm (.) no reason  
73 I Well you know (.) you've got a choice  
74 J Yeah  
75 I What were your thoughts  
76 J Well (.) it's really my girlfriend  
77 I Go on  
78 J She like umm (.) she like wanted them (.) cos they were  
79 like doing stuff like university and stuff  
80 I Right  
81 J And she's going to uni and that lot (.) and she wanted it  
82 (.) and that  
83 I How did you feel about it  
84 J Didn't really care

### **5.5.2 - The Advantages and Disadvantages of the Interviewer Constructing Data with Participants**

The second issue focuses on the positioning of me, as the researcher and interviewer.

Within this study, I was seen as an active participant in the research process. In the social constructionist approach to interviewing, the interviewer actively creates different scenarios and situations that the participants engage with and comments on. It is hoped

that participants will discuss a range of often contradictory responses to questions. This allows different themes and codes, from a variety of different perspectives, active within the participants' talk to be explored. The interview is then seen not as an accurate record of the participants' views but rather an interactive explanation of how a participant might deal with situations from different perspectives (Hammersly and Atkinson 2007; Holstein and Gubrium, 1997).

This social constructionist approach could lead to the idea of anything goes in an interview and accusations of creating an interviewer bias. Holstein and Gubrium (1997) suggest that this view of bias is only a relevant concept if you consider that the interview is the process of gaining information that is already there, in just one form, in the participants. In reality, this type of interviewing involves a shifting and change of approach to interviews. It sees reality and the individual as a constellation of perspectives rather than a monolithic whole (Derrida, 1978; Hollway, 1989) and that these perspectives need teasing out from the participants.

An extract of an interview from this study, extract 26, is shown overleaf. The empirical evidence from this and other interviews in this study suggest that interaction between interviewer's questions and interviewees is, perhaps, overstated by its critics and that, perhaps, the questions perform a different role to that envisaged.

I use two main questions marked in the extract, both indicated. Both of these questions could be argued to be leading the interviewees if the interviews were understood as traditional realist research interviews. Interestingly, though, in both cases the interviewees do not respond well: they say very little in response to these questions.

Where, in this case, the participants do respond well is to comments from each other and

from the interviewer. It is in these areas that the codes and themes are being produced. There are a large number of examples of this type of passage throughout the data from the study. The interviewees are responding to the broad idea but tend to tell anecdotes rather than respond to specific questions.

This suggests that whilst participants might respond to what might be referred to as a leading question, they are not led to their dialogue. The questions appear to knit together the dialogue but did not, necessarily directly, affect the production of talk. The participants respond to the question then talk about what they want to talk about. This suggests that, perhaps, the process of constructing dialogue is less interactive than imagined and is based on a broader notion of introducing ideas to the conversation. It highlights that talk is co-produced rather than led.

#### Extract 26, Transcript 1

- 58 C So I always think no we can't let it go on (right) like the  
59 BNP (.) frankly BNP
- 60 IQ1 Yep (.) so it would concern you (.) that if you didn't vote  
61 (.) they might get in
- 62 C Yea
- 63 I Ok
- 64 C It has happened already (.) in some parts
- 65 I Yep Yeah
- 66 I How about you?
- 67 B Um (.) yeah because of the sense of responsibility (right)  
68 and I think quite a lot of it is just my family (go on) my

69 family (.) my dad's always voted for a particular party  
70 (right) he's always said it's important an' he always told  
71 me it's important so I feel like (.) it's important as well  
72 (right) while I think if I came from a background where  
73 nobody ever voted (.) and they didn't see it as changing  
74 their lives to vote I probably wouldn't

75 C I happen to disagree with that (.) my dad doesn't vote (.)  
76 my mum doesn't vote me (.) my younger brother I  
77 suspect will start voting once he reaches age (.) but it's  
78 me and my older brother (.) we actually just started  
79 elections and (.) we always been voting actually um (.)  
80 when I was fourteen I nicked my dad's vote (right)  
81 (laughter)

82 I So that's very keen

83 C No I did (.) I was like (.) I don't know why I was so keen  
84 (.) I can't admit why at fourteen why I was so interested  
85 um (.) but I did nick his vote and I did vote on it (right)  
86 and (.) well (.) um my parents don't vote but the rest of  
87 my family does

88 IQ2 Right (.) OK (.) alright (.) Um (.) so it's coming up to the  
89 election (.) do you get excited interested?

90 B I find it (.) I find it difficult to tell the difference between  
91 the party's policies

92 A Yeah

- 93 I Why?
- 94 B Because they copy each other so one person has a
- 95 popular policy (.) the other one (why) copies it umm (.)
- 96 but (.) don't know

Despite its limited effects, there are still a number of conclusions regarding how interviews might need to be approached in social constructionist social psychology that need to be considered.

The interviewer must be able to ask questions to stimulate responses in different scenarios and situations. The interviewer needs to be prepared to challenge and explore the responses of participants but the interviewer still cannot use directly leading questions. Even if the effects of the interviewer questions are perhaps limited, one would wish to limit the extent that the interviewer is creating answers. There is a distinction between an interviewer probing, challenging and interacting with a participant and the interviewer being the cause of participants' responses. Social constructionist psychology is premised on the idea of the decentred self (Derrida; 1978) and that consequently an individual might have a number of perspectives that the social constructionist approach might tease out but an overzealous questioning approach could undermine this.

The consequences of this are that the interviewer needs to prepare and consider a range of follow-up questions that they might need to use in an interview and the interviewer needs to carefully evaluate the follow-up questions that they have used after every interview. One should carefully consider what might come up and how it could be dealt with before an interview and evaluate the effect of questions after the interview.

### 5.5.3 - The Advantages and Disadvantages of Coding for Action Orientation: What Participants are doing with their Talk

The third issue that this section considers is that individuals are not just talking, their talk is purposeful: they achieve something with it. This point within social constructionist social psychology is complicated. It stems from the work of a number of linguistic philosophers (Austin, 1975; Searle 1969; 1979; Wittgenstein, 1999) that have suggested that talk has an action orientation.

The initial starting point for this idea is that talk is not just the repository of a message. As De Saussure (1983) and Chomsky (1986, 1988) suggest it is not just what we say but the way in which we say it that is important. From this starting point, we can start to think of talk as claims, ploys, challenges and other actions. This presumption has both clear advantages and problems associated with it.

Consider extract 27 overleaf. The extract with participant B explaining why they thought that voting was important, Participants C and A agree but it is important for A to explicate their particular viewpoint and explain how this is different from participants B. the participant explains that an important part of what participant B said could be explained by the fight for women's suffrage (Lines 31-55). At line 58 onwards participant C wants to explain how strongly they feel and so threatens violence but perhaps feels that the comment was inappropriate and then consequently laughs and then suggests that people should vote to prevent extremism. Each of these pieces of talk can be seen to be adding exposition to the prior pieces and understanding that they follow on one from the other is an important part of the analysis. The talk is expressing views explaining positions and building purposefully on the prior comments.



Extract 27. Transcript 1

- 27 B Cos you feel (.) if you are part of the democracy you feel  
28 some sense of responsibility
- 29 I Yeah (.) you all agree on that?
- 30 C Yeah
- 31 A An I think also um (.) well for me anyway women fought  
32 for the vote
- 33 I Right
- 34 A And they (.) an ( ) women fought for the vote  
35 and you had subjects
- 36 I Yes
- 37 A Emily Bronte who (.) went on hunger strike
- 38 I Yep
- 39 A And wanted equivalency to men (.) and unfortunately in  
40 the 1900s that wasn't the case and so (.) I think it kinda  
41 like, it's come, it's (.) your right to vote to make a  
42 difference to make a change to um (.) where the  
43 country you living in
- 44 I Yep
- 45 A So (.) it does annoy you when young people don't vote  
46 especially women as well I think common people died  
47 for you if (.) if um (.) Emily Bronte kinda knew that her  
48 fight was a lost cause really then she probably wouldn't  
49 have bothered and even know perhaps (.) women

50 wouldn't have got the vote which you think sounds  
51 ridiculous (.) but it was the law in those days you  
52 weren't allowed to vote and even when umm (.) women  
53 were given the vote you had to be (.) you had to be  
54 thirty-five (.) I think it was it wasn't like (.) how it is now  
55 where you had to be over eighteen

56 I Right

57 A So you know (.) I'm quite (.) I'm quite strong about that

58 C I agree with that I always tell my friends who are  
59 women that people died for the vote (.) you better vote  
60 or I'll come over there and kick you (laughs) no but  
61 there is partly also fear for me as well (.) because  
62 certain parties have gotten more powerful and that  
63 always gives me (.) a cold heart so I always think no we  
64 can't let it go on (right) like the BNP (.) frankly BNP

There were also, though, a number of occasions within the research where it was apparent that talk was being used for reasons of which I was unaware or unsure. It was always possible that talk was being used to identify with a group or for some other social reason that was not readily apparent. The awareness that this could happen was both enlightening and problematic. One could be aware that what participants were doing must be for some other motive because otherwise it would not make sense, but one could also be at a loss to suggest what that motive might be. Talk can be ambiguous in meaning and understanding this, whilst important makes us aware that it can on

occasions be nonsensical, full of corrections and with phrases and words unspoken or missing (Goffman, 1981).

## **5.6 – Exploring Issues with the use of Social Constructionist Social Psychology in Political Science**

There were a number of issues identified during the course of the pilot, primarily through consideration of the reasons for less well-evidenced results that appeared to be arguments against the use of the social constructionist social psychology in political science. The first of these was a reliance on the skills of the interviewer and researcher.

### **5.6.1 - A Reliance on the Skills of the Interviewer and Researcher**

Social constructionist social psychology often uses interviews as a data collection tool (see for example Billig, 1998; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Widdicombe and Woofit, 1995). The use of interviews is seen as problematic (Potter and Hepburn, 2005). The approach adopted by this study alongside many others is to use interviews cautiously, conscious of their drawbacks (Silverman, 2005; 2009; Smith et al, 2005; Speer 2002a). Consequently, the interview is still a particularly well-used method in social psychology research despite these drawbacks.

There are two well-established approaches to conducting interviews in social science research. In the first approach, the interviewer attempts merely to facilitate the answer of the participants and carefully regulates the manner in which they interact with participants such that each participant has the same interview experience (Fowler and Mangione, 1990; Platt, 2002). The very controlled nature of this approach can be detrimental to the quality of the data (Briggs, 1986; Mishler, 1986, Suchman and Jordan, 1990). The alternative approach is to see that the interviewer as always part of the data

collection and production process and recognise that the presence of the interviewer is a rich source of data in itself (Holstein and Gubrium, 1975; Buckholdt and Gubrium, 1979). The latter approach was used in this study.

It should be apparent that both forms of interviewing, to a great degree, depend on the skill of the interviewer. Kvale and Brinkmann (2005; 2009) argue that an [good] interviewer should be:

- knowledgeable;
- structuring;
- clear;
- gentle;
- open;
- steering;
- critical;
- remembering; and
- interpreting.

Whilst I broadly concur with Kvale and Brinkman, my experiences in this study suggest that there were other important factors regarding the process of setting up and conducting the interview. There are two reasons for this. First, the interview is a two-way process and some attention must be paid by the interviewer to the participants before the interview takes place to ensure that they are comfortable with the process of interviewing and prepared to talk. Second, I was using group interviews whilst Kvale and Brinkman were focusing on interviews generally.

The first important point was that it was necessary to allow space for the participants to get to know each other as the interviews were group interviews. I tried to get participants to the venue early and gave them some refreshments so that this could happen. This happens in a range of research interviews. A second point is that, in group interviews particularly, and to an extent in all semi-structured interviews it is important to know when to intervene and introduce a further question. Intervention can be necessary when the conversation starts to deteriorate but participants can reinvigorate the dialogue on their own. This is an important and frequent judgement that needs to be made by the interviewer. Early intervention may result in a loss of talk and data as participants could be about to restart a dialogue and late intervention may damage the flow of talk and the composure of the participants. The final and perhaps most important point is that a quality required in both the collection of talk and its analysis that Kvale and Brinkmann do not mention is reflection. This is crucial to understanding the impact of the interviewer and researcher on the research process.

There are a number of important and perhaps problematic consequences to both Brinkmann and Kvale's thoughts and my own. The first is that only those researchers that are skilled at conducting interviews can use the interview technique well. Kvale and Brinkmann (ibid) suggest that being a good interviewer can be learnt, but it seems reasonable to suggest that it may also be dependent on social skills and the means to establish rapport with interviewees that an interviewer possesses. One can obviously learn to interview but perhaps not that well (Bohnsack, 2004). Similarly, whilst reflection is certainly something that can be learned, researchers may have varying abilities to reflect. Some may not be as good at as others. This then may have an effect on the quality and fruitfulness of any study using social constructionist social psychology.

Findings may be sparse or asynchronous. Within the field, these issues are mitigated through peer and member confirmation: participants and other researchers check your findings. However, it suggests that results may vary in quality.

### **5.6.2 –Problems caused by Reticent Participants**

A particularly difficult issue associated with using social constructionist social psychology, which can also be a problem in a range of qualitative methodologies is that the methodology, to a degree, relies on participants having to say something about a question or topic that is being considered. This is not an issue of non-response, as such, rather it is an issue of dealing with negative responses or minimal responses: where the participants simply say “No, I do not do that”. Whilst this is, perhaps, more informative using many quantitative approaches, which rely on the number rather than depth of responses, in social constructionist social psychology it is particularly difficult to consider issues where participants have little to say on the matter. There are a number of possible reasons for this reticence by the participants and quite often it is because of a lack of understanding, knowledge or confidence in that understanding or knowledge. As this reticence by participants can be a consequence of a lack of confidence in their own understanding of a topic. Much of this problem can be mitigated by careful briefing and preparation of the participants.

In this study, there were occasions when both voting and non-voting participants were unable or unwilling to explore and discuss their views or reasons for their actions. These passages of talk tend to not resolve into codes and themes. They did not help to explain why those participants had acted in the manner that they had. In contrast, survey research might provide some insight on a matter where a large proportion of participants

respond that they do not do something or do it infrequently. In qualitative work broadly, this is more of an issue because weak responses result in a lack of talk to work with.

In the example in extract twenty-six discussed previously in the chapter, the participant J does not have a lot to say. He is unwilling, or perhaps unable, to talk to the interviewer. The consequence of this is that this passage of speech and this participant did little to contribute to the study. There are perhaps a number of reasons why participants might not be willing to speak on a matter. Clearly we are less likely to think about why we take part in certain activities than why we do not take part in others. It may not occur to us that we could do certain things. Although it is sensible to point out that there is a broad societal expectation on people to vote although as has already been made clear this may not occur in parts of society.

In quantitative work and particularly survey research, where to an extent, the aim of the research has more to do with the number of participants agreeing with particular statements, this difficulty is often overcome by offering responses such as "I never vote". The research value is then realised by asking a large number of participants' questions and considering the range of responses that they give: if ten percent of a representative sample suggest that they never vote that informs the field. If participants do not want to discuss their reasons for not voting the purpose of qualitative work generally, and social constructionist social psychology specifically, are hampered. This is because within social constructionist social psychology it is then difficult to identify or understand codes and themes and the consequent rationale underlying them.

## 5.7 - Why We Should Use Social Constructionist Social Psychology within Political Science

This study has demonstrated that social constructionist social psychology can potentially and fruitfully be used to explore issues within political science. The use of social constructionist social psychology in this study has provoked a number of very illuminating suggestions regarding the decline in turnout and the way in which voting decisions are made by the 18-24 cohort. This suggests that social constructionist social psychology does have something relevant and useful to offer to political science.

Social constructionist social psychology, in this study with reference to the participant group, has been able to:

- arrive at similar positions to a number of methodological approaches already used in political science but has been able to potentially adds significant description to what we already know; and
- has been able to suggest a further hypothesis explaining the decline in turnout of the 18-24 cohort at UK general elections.

These findings were arrived at through the identification of the themes that participants used. The themes identified in this study were produced by prompt questions designed to allow answers consistent with existing explanations of propensity to vote. However, this did not mean that the themes were a product of the prompt questions: that the themes were produced consistent with some existing explanations of propensity to vote but also added significant new information demonstrates this.

The findings were a result of various processes and factors that were part of the social constructionist social psychology methodology. The process of coding exhaustively to



every possible code had the effect of maximising the potential of the data. Coding for the action orientation of talk, the active interviewing process ((Holstein and Gubrium, 1975; Buckholdt and Gubrium, 1979) and the realisation that people are doing things with their talk was important because it treats talk as a complex multifaceted construct rather than something that is straightforward and to be understood as heard. The constant reflection on the processes gave a further analytic edge to the study and allowed a deeper engagement to be made when analysing transcripts which were realised through the inductive, thematised approach. It was the foundation of some findings because it encouraged the researcher to probe into the talk and ask questions of it which otherwise might not be asked.

Interviews were used for data collection in the study. Although, it has been noted previously in the thesis that there is an argument in social constructionist social psychology for the use of naturally occurring talk (Potter and Hepburn, 2005), one of the key points of the methodology is that the participants are actually talked to. The most important point deriving from that is that people's talk can be a rich source of data. The body of talk produced by twelve group interviews amounted to 185,000 words. This suggests that the methodology as with many qualitative methods relies on a very rich but also, in some ways, limited source of data. This could be part of the explanation for the methodology strengths and weaknesses in some areas. It simply used a much larger body of data than might normally be used within empirical political science work but this was produced by a mere forty participants. It was perhaps unsurprising that the insights into the participants' voting behaviour discussed previously in section 5.2 were realised

There are some limitations when using this method. A number of elements of the process of conducting this type of research are dependent on the skills and abilities of the researcher and the willingness of participants to engage in the process. This can be very different from some realist research where an interviewer is limited and constrained by a very exacting interview schedule, requiring the same stimuli to be given to each participant (Oppenheim, 1992), consequently, the ability of the researcher to reflect and understand their own impact on the research process and how it may differ from other researchers becomes paramount.

## **5.8 -The Potential Uses of Social Constructionist Social Psychology within Political Science: Possibilities and Problems**

It is apparent from the findings of this study that what social constructionist social psychology has to offer is often in the form of possible new approaches to theory and new insights into pre-existing issues within political science. In this sense, social constructionist social psychology could be used to supplement and enhance existing methods or as a method of investigation in its own right. One of the benefits of using social constructionist social psychology is that it can be used to explore the meanings and interpretation in participants' talk which could be an important enhancement to a quantitative study. A significant part of research in political science is dependent on meaning and interpretation. There are existing quantitative approaches such as Q methodology where the aim of the research is to explore participants subjective viewpoints, participants are involved in determining what responses are allowable and can hold a variety of positions and consequently, Q methodology is consistent with a social constructionism.

Some qualitative methodologies such as grounded theory are ambivalent towards social constructionism. Whilst there are a number of practitioners of social constructionism (See Charmaz, 2000; 2006; 2008 in particular) within grounded theory, there is also a significant antipathy. Glaser (2002) refers to social constructionism as an attempt to dignify the data and avoid confronting researcher bias. Consequently, some grounded theory practitioners argue for a realist ontological position, that individuals are simply a person with a single complex self (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Korsgaard, 2003). Some of the benefits claimed of using grounded theory may also be found in social constructionist approaches. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) argue that grounded theories claim to be the only source of new theories is overstated and that the same methodological grounding of theory is entailed in discourse analysis broadly defined. Kelle (1997) in contrast, suggests that grounded theories coding mechanisms are forced and do not recognise the history of coding variations that they draw on.

This suggests that social constructionist social psychology with a thematised approach could possibly be used as an alternative to grounded theory in order to create theory from talk, in the same manner, but with a contrasting philosophical stance. The benefits of doing this would be that there are a number of features of the method such as the exhaustive coding, and coding of talk rather than underlying psychological states within the social constructionist approach that appear in this study, at least, to have produced benefits and it appears from work such as Charmaz (2000; 2006; 2008) that this is, to a degree, already occurring.

A variety of approaches to qualitative research such as ethnography and case studies could use social constructionist social psychology as part of their analysis. The benefit of

doing so would be that this would be an alternative approach that may well produce different information. Furthermore, the philosophical issues that arise when attempting to use a social constructionist social psychology approach in something like a grounded theory study are not necessarily apparent. There is already an existing contradictory position within ethnography which suggests that there is an element of social constructionism within it (Hammersley, 1992). Researchers look and try to hear different voices within the data from participants. Then, as Hammersley highlights, problematically, attempt to determine a single underlying reality. A continuation of accepting that there are perspectives might allow a social constructionist approach to be more widely adopted.

At the same time as social constructionist social psychology present a number of possibilities, there are also a number of barriers, or issues apparent, to realising these possibilities. These are, more often than not, questions of incommensurability between methodologies and disciplines.

The first of these issues is that political science has a tendency to focus on broad societal issues (Bartels and Brady, 1993; Jackson, 1996; King, 2008) rather than at the individual level more frequently found in social constructionist social psychology. This is partly a result of the individual-level focus of social constructionist social psychology, which sees meaning as being relativistic, limited to specific social, historical and cultural instances (Burr, 2003; 2015). This is in contrast to realist-dominated political science which values broader more widely applicable findings (Smith, 1998). The consequence of this relativism is that there are issues and difficulties in aggregating social constructionist social

psychology findings which tend to limit its use and appeal in political science. This is an issue that this thesis aims to, in part, challenge.

The second issue is again an issue which is a consequence of the different epistemic positions. In social constructionist research, there is a presumption that participants will use multiple narratives that they will talk from the different positions that they hold. This position sees the realist ethical position of hearing a single narrative participants' voice as limiting and restricting the participants and to an extent imposing the values of the researcher on the participants voices (Gergen and Kaye, 1992; Penn and Frankfurt, 1994).

There are similar issues with the parallel processes of assuring the quality or the validity of research in the two disciplines. The process of ensuring validity in realist political science research contradicts the central tenets of social constructionism that there are a variety of warrantable and credible perspectives created by individuals regarding social situations and issues as it seeks to determine a single valid and objective viewpoint (Burr, 2003; 2015; Parker, 2006).

A broadly related issue is one of language. Each approach tends to use language that is linked to the presumptions that they hold. The problem with this is that to a degree the presumptions that are linked to particular words and phrases are often tacit and unacknowledged but may affect the manner in which an individual approaches research. Words such as cohort, sample and attitude can shape us towards particular positions. In this thesis I attempted to use language from the two different approaches consciously, reflecting about how it might affect what I do, and this can be seen in the reflective sections at the end of some of the prior chapters, but this does not mean that it did not sway the way in which I saw the data or came to my conclusions.

There are two connected differences between two perspectives that underlie the issues that I have discussed. The first of these is the objectivity-subjectivity issue. This focuses on the realist claim that there is one reality we can know and can measure and that we should pursue better observation and understanding of that one reality as opposed to the social constructionist, relativist claim that we can only have multiple, equally warrantable and subjective perspectives on that reality whatever it may be (Burr, 2003; 2015; Smith, 1998). The second connected issue then relates to the social constructionist idea of a multiple self; the self as a constellation of positions as opposed to the realist position of a single complex identity (Derrida, 1978; Hollway, 1989).

According to Rorty, these notions of objectivity and subjectivity are questionable and the distinctions between the idea of an objective hard fact and a subjective perspective may be little more than a matter of rhetoric (1991). Rorty is arguing that in reality we talk about being objective but this merely facilitates the position of the researcher in social science and society and the reality may be less than this ideal. This suggests that concerns regarding the objectivity of research may be a little overstated. I personally would argue that most, if not all, realist researchers understand that their findings are to a degree subjective but aim to make their research as objective as possible. My view then is a little more pointed than Rorty, I argue that the notion of objectivity drives realist research and acts as an ideal but it is deeply questionable whether it can be, in reality, achieved.

These points then make the notion of studying subjectivity more relevant. If objectivity is an ideal that may not necessarily be realised it is relevant to pragmatically examine what does occur. If it is accepted that in reality many pieces of research are not wholly objective but at least to a degree subjective then it is equally logical to accept that there

may then be equally warrantable subjective perspectives. It is apparent that where methods consistent with social constructionism are being used in political science ideas there has been some rebalancing of notions of subjectivity and objectivity. Whilst it is not the aim of this thesis to suggest exactly what the way forward might be, further exploring of the actuality of objectivity and subjectivity in political science and realism may be of benefit.

## 5.9 — Some Concluding Thoughts

This thesis has sought to explore the use of social constructionist social psychology in political science and in so doing:

- suggest and consider the usefulness of the methodology within political science; and
- inform its future use in political science.

A study was undertaken considered the change in attitudes to voting of the 18-24 cohort from 1992 onwards. This is an important question because the change is an important cause of a general decline in turnout across all cohorts in UK elections and this pattern is being repeated in a number of other major democracies (Blais, 2000; Dalton, 1988; 1996; 2004; Franklin, 1996; Stoker, 2006). The study took eight existing explanations of this change in attitudes to voting and reframed them into prompt questions that could be posed to participants in this study. The study used group interviews and social constructionist social psychology techniques to identify codes and themes used by the participants and derived from the prompt questions. The study demonstrated that in a number of areas that social constructionist social psychology was able to inform and

further our understanding of the participants' attitude towards voting as measured against the existing explanations. As a result, of this study it can be suggested that there was in the participant group:

- a connection between political efficacy, political communication and political knowledge;
- that there was a culture of learning to abstain from voting;
- that party identification was weak;
- that the notion of civic duty could be expanded;
- that participants were apathetic rather than disengaged;
- that there was little sign of non-electoral politics;
- that the participants did not vote rationally; and
- that the process of socialisation appeared to differ between voting and non-voting participants.

This provided new information and additional explanations relating to a number of the existing explanations of the changes in voting behaviour and this could possibly influence the way in which we think about these theories in the future and might possibly suggest new research avenues.

There were a number of caveats and limitations regarding using social constructionist social psychology. These principally revolve around the issue of the various skills that the researcher and interviewers need to conduct the research well and that we would expect some variation with researchers with regard to these skills. There were also a number of reasons for the strong performance of social constructionist social psychology identified in the study. These were:



- the volume of data produced in the method;
- that participants were actually talked to;
- the exhaustive coding process;
- the style of interviewing undertaken;
- the thematic analysis used; and
- the presumption that talk was complex and multifaceted.

This thesis then suggests that social constructionist social psychology has potential uses across political science in any areas that can be open to interpretation or where there are benefits in understanding how participants could interpret information.

An important part of this thesis is to consider the next steps in exploring the use of social constructionist social psychology in political science. The aim of this endeavour would be to open up methodological and cross-disciplinary possibilities. Naturally, to convince others to do this involves a number of distinct steps. Two of the points of this thesis are that I have demonstrated that a method unusual to political science can work and can be of benefit. For academics that tend to adopt a realist approach, this would be important. However, a study of this kind undertaken here would probably provoke comments about the benefits of a method claiming at its heart to be culturally and historically specific. There are questions about its applicability because unlike realist quantitative work there is no claim to produce broadly applicable findings rather the conclusions suggest an inherent limitation and this leads to a question of its explicability; could this study be reproduced with a different political science topic and a different group of participants.

These concerns stem from the history of rational and scientific thought that led academics to search for conclusions that were acceptable and agreeable to all of them: to achieve a sense of solidarity and to remove perceptions of disagreement and competition from the academic world (Rorty, 1991).

The idea of working in this cross disciplinary and cross-methodological fashion is also provocative and challenging. I find that a lot of my colleagues find the idea difficult to accept because of the different ontological and epistemological focus and the consequences of these differences, as discussed in section 5.8. This is to an extent mirrored in the academic world, while many academics such as Charmaz (2000; 2006; 2008) have sought to extend cross-methodological and cross-disciplinary works there has been some negative reaction to this (see Glaser, 2002). I think from my point of view that the boundaries between disciplines are not something that participants understand or appreciate. A participant does not recognise a particular answer as being about politics, sociology, psychology or economics and, therefore, this begs the question of why we social scientists break down things in the manner that we do.

At the heart of the matter is the question of objectivity rather than the question of subjectivity. It is clear and apparent that subjective positions are worthy of study and research in their own right. The issue is whether it is possible to be objective within research or whether objectivity is a purely normative but unachievable objective. My view is that objectivity is an illusory goal. If that is the case researching subjectivity is not something that we could do it is something we should do.

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